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## A WORD FROM Brian Thomsen



*CYTEEN* by Carolyn Cherryh definitely falls into the category of science fiction epic. While it provides perspective on the Merchant universe, its political/mystery plot fully illustrates the major theme of "nature versus nurture," or more simply, what makes an individual an individual.

*CYTEEN* is also an epic in size (over 330,000 words long). Though published in hardcover last year in a single volume, we have decided to breeze it into three parts for its paperback edition with the following subtitles: *The Betrayal*, *The Rebirth* and *The Vindication*.

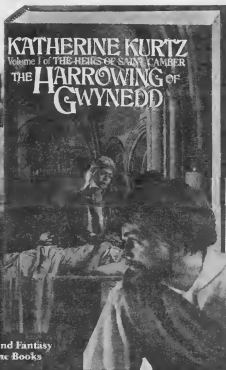
Rather than the higher-priced trade paperback form used for many long books such as *The Mists of Avalon*, *CYTEEN* will be available in three popularly priced mass market books released once a month for three consecutive months. Each volume is as long as an average SF paperback, and by the end of April, all three *CYTEEN* volumes can proudly take their place on your bookshelf next to the other C.J. Cherryh classics.

Instead of the usual question, I'd like to offer a suggestion. For Valentine's Day, give a Questar book to someone you love.

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Suzette Haden Elgin ("Lo, How an Oak E'er Blooming," February 1986) writes with a gentleness and persuasion reminiscent of the late Manly Wade Wellman. Here she tells us a lyrical tale of tension, trouble and the nature of tornadoes.

# Tornado

A

**By Suzette Haden Elgin**

**A**T 909, BRIAR was not the oldest of the Ozarques. There were four more, farther in toward the Spiral's core among the limestone bluffs, who were older than she was by many years. But Briar had the skill of hearing — she had that to such a degree that when she said, "I heard . . .," even those elders fell silent and paid heed. Briar, they said, could hear the persimmons ripening; it was best to listen, and to do so respectfully, when she said there was something to be heard.

This day, with the air lying in thick layers over the low mountains, soggy as creek clay, what Briar heard was the tornado call. Close now; only one final note missing, and the whole trembling on the edge of being sounded and sustained with the mighty chord that would go up from the land all of a sudden, *demanding*. And the tornado would hear, and it would come to the call, roaring down out of the sky, beaming in on the chord, bearing destruction that humans could not yet even measure.

This one had been building a long time; Briar had been monitoring it

almost nine years now. In the past few weeks, as it began to add notes and gain strength, she had alerted all the other Ozarques, from the Spiral's heart in the Arkansas cave country out to its farthest-flung borders in Kansas and Missouri and Oklahoma. Her warning had set the Quindaw scurrying in panic in their dens under the persimmon trees, making little plaintive cries; and all along the Spiral, the Ozarques and their daughters had felt obliged to murmur to the Quindaw. "Hush, now . . . hush! It's only Tornado. We don't fear Tornado."

As they did not. A tornado could no more uproot an Ozarque than it could rip a mountain out of its bed; the Ozarques were not concerned about any wind, be it ever so awesomely coiled and roaring over the land. As for the Quindaw, if the tornado whirled them up into its blackness, why, that was great fun, was it not? And wouldn't they be bragging to one another about how high they'd flown, and how long?

"Well," said the Quindaw. "Afterward! That's *afterward*!" They didn't like the anticipation, though not a one of them could remember ever being hurt by a Liberator Wind. Roughed up a bit, perhaps; bruised, perhaps; but never *really* harmed. And so the Ozarques bid the Quindaw cease their fussing, and the little people did try.

"How long, Briar?" the other Ozarques asked, and she said, "Today, might could be. No later than tomorrow, certainly."

I AM TORNADO! I COME WHEN YOU CALL ME!

I COME WHIRLING DOWN AT YOUR CRY. . . .

I AM TORNADO, MY SURNAME IS WHIRLWIND;

I COME ON BLACK WINGS FROM THE SKY. . . .

MY SISTER THE LIGHTNING, IN LETTERS OF SPLENDOR

SHE WRITES OUT MY NAME ON THE SKY;

MY BROTHER THE THUNDER, HE READS THE INSCRIPTIONS,

ANNOUNCING MY NAME AS I FLY. . . .

This call was coming from the backmost lot of a sorry trailer park in Arkansas, where three good people were groping along a trek of misery through an equally sorry existence. They were people of ordinary name and ordinary mien — Billy Wommack; and his wife, Jo-Ellen Wommack, that had been a Cantrell before she defied her parents and married Billy;

and their thirteen-year-old daughter, Amy. And the air around their beat-up old trailer house was so thick with the sticky stuff of bitter frustration and festering regret that . . . as Briar put it to the others, wanting it marked . . . "You could make preserves out of it."

A tornado call is only a chord — a special chord. Anyplace that people feel trapped, they set up the beginnings of that chord. Most of them never get completed; most tornadoes stay well up above the land or just touch down playfully to bother a tree or an outbuilding. But once in a while there's enough despair to finish the chord, and the call goes out like the call of a mighty bell — and then the tornado hears, and comes to the call. It happens that city people, by and large, call earthquakes instead, which is one of the problems with *being* city people. But the Wommacks, living in the trailer park called Pleasant Refuge, in a nameless patch of tick-infested scrub pine in the Arkansas outback, were the very opposite of city people.

On the night before the Ozarque named Briar announced that the tornado call was trembling on the verge, Billy Wommack came home from work tired. Not with the satisfying tired that comes of doing work you love, but the nasty, bone-itching tired of standing all day serving bad food to people who knew it and ate it anyway — and hating it. Billy worked at a fast-food place, and despised himself for it, and he figured other people despised him, too. Not that there was any shame to working the Kwik-Burger — of course not. It was honest work, and no shame to that whatever. But working when it was work you loathed, and staying at it just because you were too cowardly to do otherwise . . . *that* was what he was ashamed of. Billy had a good mind, and he'd meant to go far. He'd never intended to end up in the tail end of nowhere, smack up against a wall of his own making.

Pioneers, Billy often thought. Pioneers! They got up, and they loaded up a dozen things they felt they could not do without, and they turned their faces to the wind, and they just up and *went*. He'd driven across the western desert once, in a car, going fast and in comfort; and he'd known there was a clean room and bed, and good food and water, waiting for him at the other end. And he'd thought how it must have been — walking through that beside a covered wagon, carrying a baby too limp with heat and thirst even to whimper, in your arms — going you knew not where, into you knew not what — and he had shuddered and felt the dull red of

shame up along his cheek bones. He couldn't of done that. He'd of still been sitting, safe and scared, in Massachusetts, if it'd been *him*.

He came home that night, and he sat down at the peeling, ugly table — fake-wood formica and shiny, spindly legs that wobbled no matter how you fooled with them — and he ate the fine dinner Jo-Ellen had cooked for him.

Jo-Ellen was the kind of cook that the angels would of come down out of the skies to eat at her table, never mind it was rickety. Lord, but that woman could cook! *Fine* food . . . food fit for kings, and for queens, and for angels. Give her forty-five cents, Jo-Ellen Wommack would cook you up a supper you'd remember the rest of the week. For twice that, she'd set you a meal you'd remember till you died.

And when he'd finished his meal and pushed the plate away from him, and sighed with the satisfaction of a man well fed, he'd said it again. For the how many thousandth time, he did not know.

"Jo-Ellen," he said, loving her so, wishing things were better for her, "someday we're gonna have us a classy little restaurant someplace, I promise you. And people are gonna come from all over the damn world, Jo-Ellen honey, just to —"

And that was when it had happened. That was when Amy had done it. Looked straight at her daddy, looked at him with eyes that were his own eyes . . . the famous Wommack pansy blue . . . looked at him as cold and sullen as any woman grown, with a thirty-year past on her, and had said to him: "That's a LIE, Daddy! There's never gonna be any restaurant. We're never gonna go anyplace. You and Mama — you'll live here and you'll die here, and, unless a miracle happens, SO WILL I! And none of us are ever . . . EVER . . . gonna amount to anything, Daddy!" And she'd tossed that long, straight yellow hair, that was Jo-Ellen's hair, and gone right on with her supper, chewing slow and deliberate and cool as river fog. And it was Billy that had looked away first.

But it was Jo-Ellen that slapped her.

Took her full across the face with a hand that could hold out a cast-iron skillet of fried chicken while you helped yourself to it, and never so much as quiver. "Don't you *dare* talk to your daddy that way!" Jo-Ellen had screamed at their daughter, back of the WHAP! of her palm smacking the child's satin cheek. And Amy, that had never to Billy's recollection had a hand laid to anyplace but her bottom, and *that* done gently, before, only smiled at her mother. The slap rocked her, but she didn't make a sound;



and if she bit her tongue, she didn't show it.

Billy heard Amy, and saw the slap, and he got up like an old man gets up, slow and bent and hurting, and he went to the bedroom at the back of the trailer and left the women there; he said no more.

And the tornado call hummed like a hornet swarm, coming to be.

All that next day, while the Ozarques observed and waited, Jo-Ellen and Amy circled warily round each other in the cramped spaces of the trailer, in silence, those words and that slap between them. While the chord that summoned the whirlwind built and grew and strengthened.

At four o'clock in the afternoon, maddened past caring who saw or heard her, heartbroken with the guilt of having hit her daughter — who had, after all, done no more than speak the truth her parents did not have the guts to utter — Jo-Ellen marched grim and scrawny in her jeans and an old blue shirt out into the pines around Pleasant Refuge Trailer Park, her yellow hair flying every which way and her fists clenched at her sides. And in a favorite spot, a spot where there was a respectable tall cedar presiding over a boulder you could sit on and put your feet up and lean back against in comfort, she threw her arms around the cedar's great trunk and laid her face against its back and filled her lungs with the perfume of the gold-green needles and looked up to where the sky wheeled above her, and she howled, "Oh sweet Jesus, something come and get us out of this cursed place!"

I SHUN MANSIONS, THE DENS OF THE WEALTHY,

I ROAR OVERHEAD AND FLY BY;

I COME FOR THE TRAPPED ONES, THEY DO THE TORNADO DANCE,

THEY CALL ME FROM HIGHER THAN HIGH. . . .

Off on the Spiral, her own daughters close by and alert, Briar sighed and let her breath stop for just one minute, and then she said, "Now. Now it's coming! That's done it."

**F**AR AWAY, as Jo-Ellen's shriek rang out, beamed straight up by the compassionate cedar tree, the tornado heard the call, from the windplace above a cloud that was the shape of a giant anvil in the forge of a storm fueled by lightning. And it knew its name, and it spread black velvet wings and called back with a roar, and all the Ozarques on the Spiral nodded at the thunderclap and the lightning

and said, "There! There comes Tornado!" And the Quindaw scampered for cover under the sweet-smelling roots of the sassafras and the persimmon trees and the thickets of sumac and wild cherry. Like humans perversely leaping out of planes, they wanted to leap and let the wind take them — and then again, they didn't want to. And the Ozarques smiled, watching them.

An hour later, under a sweet blue sky without one cloud in it, Billy and Jo-Ellen and Amy stood, glad to the bone just to find themselves still alive, and stared at what was left of Pleasant Refuge. Not much. Tatters and fragments and scraps and splinters, and people dazed and blinking. Stunned wide awake for the first time in years.

It was all gone. EVERYTHING! The trailer. The cheap rugs they'd bought to cover the rotten linoleum. The rickety furniture. The pictures picked up for next to nothing. The Boy With The Torn Hat — he was gone. The shabby clothes and the cracked dishes, and the third-rate pots and pans Jo-Ellen had somehow managed with . . . all gone. *EVERYTHING!* How many times they'd thought ... yes, the job Billy had was worse than no job at all; but if he left it, they might lose the little they *did* have, and then what would they do? The trailer . . . the old pickup truck . . . the furniture. . . . It wasn't much, but it was all they *had*. How could you risk it? How could you *dare*? And so you went and you stood all day, and you kept a decent expression on your face and a mannerly tongue in your head. . . .

Except, Amy had not. Amy, with the terrible cruel courage of puberty, had said those words that no slap could make unsaid.

And now it was all gone. The pickup truck, too. No doubt the pieces of the pickup were piled in the tops of the trees . . . no way to assemble *them* again. Or anything else. It was just *gone*.

"Billy," said Jo-Ellen, her voice like a child's voice, "we've got the clothes on our backs. And that's all."

Billy thought a minute. "Well," he said. "That's not quite true, honey. Not *quite* true."

Jo-Ellen turned on him. "What else is there?" she wailed, looking at him fierce and wild, and she waved her arms at the devastation all around them. Amy chewed on a strand of her yellow hair and stared at them both. And Jo-Ellen asked again, "What *else*?"

Billy explained. In their account at the bank, and in the billfold that, praise God, had been in the pocket of his old jeans when the tornado hit and was there still, was the money that was left.

"But —," Jo-Ellen began, but he hushed her.

"It's enough," he said firmly.

"Enough for *what*?"

Billy looked at her, and he smiled, hesitating, not sure yet if he dared say it. "Enough," he went on, "for three bus tickets to Springfield, Missouri, Jo. Just enough."

"Springfield!"

"There's fast-food places in Springfield," said Billy, grinning now, starting to be comfortable with it all. "I can get a job in Springfield. And there's a college in Springfield, too, Jo-Ellen, where I can go. At night, after work. And learn how to keep the books and manage the restaurant."

"The *restaurant*," he said clearly, one more time, liking the feel of it in his mouth. "Our restaurant."

"But Billy, what if —"

Billy Wommack jammed his hands deep into his pockets and laughed out loud; and Amy, seeing it, too, spoke for him. "Mama," she demanded, "What have we got to *lose*?"

Nothing. They had nothing to lose. The tornado had freed them from all of that.

I AM TORNADO! I BRING LIBERATION.

DON'T FLEE FROM ME, CHILDREN OF EARTH!

I COME FOR THE PEOPLE OF POVERTY'S NATION,

I WHIRL DOWN TO BRING THEM NEW BIRTH.

MY BLACK VELVET WINGS I WILL WRAP TIGHTLY ROUND YOU.

I COME WHIRLING DOWN AT YOUR CRY;

NO MORE WORSHIP OF THINGS WHEN TORNADO HAS FOUND YOU —

I BEAR YOU UP FREE TO THE SKY. . . .

Briar, the Ozarque with the ears that could hear snow melt, made a contented sound, and spoke to her daughters.

"You go and get a quilt piece from the cedar chest," she said solemnly,

"one for each of them. Choose carefully, now. Choose for a bright day coming, and a spangled night to follow. No peaceful refuges, please, but a place of life and light and sunshine, suitable for the young, with their whole lives ahead of them."

And shortly the daughters came back with the bright scraps to be sewn neatly and securely into the quilt the Ozarque kept for the preservation of the land and all that lived upon it.

A bright green square for Billy, the color of winter wheat.

For Jo-Ellen, a scrap of scarlet, the color of a woman's passion and the blood of a birthing. A joy color.

For Amy, a bright yellow piece, the color of a sycamore leaf in October, with a fine pattern of golden rosebuds and their green leaves, setting it off.

"That'll do nicely," said Briar, and she picked up her needle.

Overhead, the tornadoes took their ease in the high air, and waited for the next summons to call them down to the world.

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### *CLARION WEST ANNOUNCES 1989 WRITERS' WORKSHOP*

The sixth annual Clarion West science fiction and fantasy writing workshop will be held from June 18 - July 29, 1989 at Seattle Central Community College, with writers-in-residence: Orson Scott Card, Karen Joy Fowler, Lucius Shepard, Connie Willis, Shawna McCarthy, and Roger Zelazny.

Applications are now being accepted. Approximately 20 students will be selected from the applicants. Tuition until March 1, 1989 is \$995. Late applications will be considered until April 1, 1989, at a tuition of \$1095. College credit and dormitory lodging are available, but are not covered by tuition. Limited scholarships are available. Request scholarship form in advance and return it with your application.

To apply, submit 20 - 30 pages of manuscript (1 or 2 short stories or a novel excerpt with outline) with a cover letter describing your background and reasons for wanting to attend Clarion West, and a \$25 application fee payable to Clarion West. Send to: Clarion West, 340 15th Avenue East, Suite 350, Seattle, WA 98112.



# BOOKS

## A L G I S B U D R Y S

*Wheel of The Winds*, M.J. Engh, Tor, \$18.95

*The New Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, James Gunn, Ed., Viking, \$24.95

and

*Blood Sport*, Robert F. Jones, Dell, \$1.50 (1975)

MARY JANE Engh is, of course, the author of *Arslan*, which if it is not yet a recognized SF classic that's not for want of trying by people like Samuel R. Delany, editor David Hartwell, *Booklist*'s Roland Green, me, and a fair parcel of others. There is no question but that Engh is a superb novelist, with a superb instinct for what's crucial to SF. And that's very much as distinguished from some more widely recognized new talents whose stature is founded on a superb instinct for what many readers will immediately recognize as innovative and striking. A lot of those

works will fade out with time: *Arslan* will not.

The test for durability, I think, occurs in the area of integrity. The question you ask is: Does the narrative consistently and elegantly validate the author's central proposition? If the answer is at least a conditional Yes, you have something that's likely to stand forever, no matter what fashions come and go. To determine the degree of likelihood, you then ask questions like How consistently? and in what way elegantly?

The consistency has to be high. Even modest internal contradictions that would do no harm to a merely good piece of satisfactory ephemera are fatal to a proposed classic. And while there are many satisfactory sorts of elegance in narrative construction — particularly the elegance of economy, as practiced by a Heinlein or a Herbert at their peak — true classics seem to benefit from a wealth of detail. That's not always true, but if your SF proposition is particularly shocking, it's probably a very good idea to

write it up with a wealth of homely incident so as to support its asserted validity. It's not enough to have the central characters figure in major incidents in which everyone agrees to the effectiveness of the Eurasian conqueror's methods. It's necessary, or at least an excellent artistic decision, also to give us glimpses of people preparing meals and doing laundry in ways that can be seen to have been changed away from the midwestern American norm of our day . . . and changed as they plausibly would have changed had an Arslan appeared and triumphed in Illinois.

As you may guess if you did not already know, *Arslan* is that rare creation, the genuine work of speculative political science.\*

And, by the way, go look up "problematical" in a decent dictionary. It does not mean "this stops us cold" any more than "presently" means "right now" or "momentarily" means "soon." For that matter, the stuff on the roast beef isn't a substance called "au jus." We do not digress; precise use of language is

the sine qua non of all forms of literary elegance. The degree to which we shall be able to share classics broadly in the future is determined by the degree to which the audience can accept precise communication. This is a major factor in why more and more publishers are publishing more and more mediocrity, and feeling less and less need to hire editors who can see it for what it is.

At any rate, by the standards described above, *Arslan* is a classic. Now, what of the author's second book?

Well, there's a classic in *Wheel of The Winds*, but you have to dig for it a little. So it's not a classic. On the other hand, it's excellent validation for the idea that M.J. Engh is a major writer, safely beyond the possibility that her first book was a flash in the pan.\*

Engh made several daring decisions with this book. Possibly because she didn't want to be classified into a rut, this is not an overtly intellectual close-to-home story

\* Fake ones abound, of course. That's O.K. as long as the readers are no less naive than the writers. The problem for the writers will — or at least should — come when they grow up and re-read these confections, squirming with well-deserved embarrassment. What the readers might squirm with is problematical.

\* That is, a successful ignition of the primer but a failure to transmit combustion into the breech where the main powder charge is waiting to do its work. I believe the expression derives from early firearms technology, pre-dating the form of gold-mining to which it is sometimes ascribed. Cf. "Lock, stock, and barrel," which certainly has nothing to do with a grocery.

based on factors detected in actual human history. Instead, it's cast in the form of a marvelous voyage, which puts it into a category with Hal Clement's *Mission of Gravity* and with some of the recent work of Robert Silverberg and Gene Wolfe.

It also fits, a little, with the 1950s pseudoanthropological works of Robert Randall and E.B. Cole, and all subsequent stories in which the wise (or heedless) Earthmen bring ruin wittingly or unwittingly to the less industrialized culture of an alien race. So, thus safely classified, Engh's work can be plausibly, but falsely, regarded as a rather conventional effort. It's not any such thing.

Its technical weakness is that it's not deftly paced. Incidents that would have yielded picturesque scenes are sometimes skimmed, while other incidents are too extensively narrated. Scenes that contain high drama are sometimes too diffidently begun, and too abruptly dismissed. As a whole, the book contains perhaps ten percent too much wordage. As we sometimes find ourselves saying, what this needed was another draft. But what we have is much closer than most to delivering many of the fundamental thrills inherent in SF. If you read primarily for the discovery of logical but unexpected features

of an alien landscape and ecology, and if you enjoy having them written in a way such that you suddenly slap your head and realize what the actual situation looks like, you should not skip this book; it will give you a lot of that.

The premise is that this Earthman is a scientist landed surreptitiously on an alien planet for the purpose of gathering climatological data. Wounded, confused, and separated from his equipment, he wanders from the barbaric hinterland into the clutches of the dominant, Medieval, culture, from whose prison he escapes to undertake the circumnavigation of the world in order to get back to his gear.

The story is told from the point of view of the warden he escaped and the (female) merchant captain on whose ship, *Mouse*, the three of them attempt his journey. Unlikely but plausible circumstances, founded on excellent characterisations, produce this unlikely result. And they keep the three of them together, through thick and thin, as the scientist and the two natives — accompanied by the Captain's old dog — wander farther and farther, encountering marvels of which the natives often know even less than their captive/companion/mentor/apprentice.

Being Medieval and provincial, neither the warden nor even the

captain know much of what lies beyond the horizon, have no idea of what a planet is, what makes seasons, what their sun is, why the winds blow, or that their world does not rotate, so that half their journey will be in utter darkness.

Since the story is told exclusively through their eyes, with Engh faithfully preserving their point of view on what's so normal it's hardly worth mentioning, there are potential discoveries for you on every page: what the actual size of the *Mouse* might be, or, conversely, of how much strength per unit of bulk is housed in these people; how Broz might differ from what we would call a dog; similarly, what the ship crows are like. There's fascination in the astrophysics, climatology and physics of this world, which, we gradually realize, is far rougher on the Earthman than the natives realize, with their fantastic endurance and ability to recover quickly from most, but not all, wounds. And the engineering of both the native cultures and the Terrestrial one are just unconventional enough to yield a nice reward to pondering by the dyed-in-the-wool SF reader.

Engh's characterizations are unusually appealing. The warden and the captain share what appears to be a cultural grumpiness and hard-headedness. But the captain is distinctly more drawn toward see-

ing advantage in examining the unknown, while the warden is convinced that stern conservatism is the best course — but can't see how he can decently abandon the Earthman to his fate. (Mendacious, wily and fundamentally unhuman though the Earthman is.) These are distinct individuals against a consistent cultural background — a very difficult trick to pull off — and from the beginning we see ourselves (that is, the only human being in the cast, up to nearly the very end) as others see us.

There is something almost 1930-ish in this tale; 1930s adventure fiction in that great tradition, that is, not 1930s SF. This is a tale that cries out for N.C. Wyeth color plates depicting great daring, privation, peril, marvels seen, nearly impossible tasks performed and nearly fatal problems overcome, done among decent resolute companions who come to satisfactory ends as people united by a crucial task well done. There is no sex depicted in this story, or even alluded-to except once in passing — two of the *Mouse's* crew eventually become pregnant, but we have no idea of how — and no one needs to go to the bathroom in print, except once when Broz marks a spot. And so we get that curiously intriguing effect of knowing that these things exist in this world, and



are accounted for in its creator's mind, but are not germane to the processes being depicted. And this is artistically *right*, just as Ursula K. LeGuin was right in not going into clinical detail in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

Despite the temptation to make the allusion, Engh is not as much like LeGuin as she is like Gene Wolfe — though even there the differences add up to more than the similarities do. If all goes as it should, she will be seen in due course as having a stature equal to theirs. And what of her next book? Space combat? Cyberpunk? Dragons? A bodice-ripper? It could, you know, be anything, except small.

I don't know of a single reference book in this field that isn't open to cavils. Many are downright full of fabrications, and all of them, even the latest, strongly reflect the editor's doctrinaire view of the history of this field.

The way to use them, I have learned, is to pick the ones with style. I think we are generally agreed that the Nicholls *Encyclopedia* badly needs an update but is otherwise the best widely available. Best not because it's relatively free of legend presented as fact . . . although it seems to be better than some in that respect . . . but because once you've adapted to its rather un-

abashed personality, you know where you are. You have to go elsewhere to get data on things that have happened since the 1970s, but up to that point in time it's the basic reference of choice.

This continues to be true, I think, despite the appearance of *The New Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. There are several reasons for this tentative verdict.\*

One is Viking's substandard production job, if you care who wrote the essays or want to look these people up in alphabetical order so you can easily appraise the bias in any given essay. Another is a format that cries out for a cross-index but doesn't have one. (Neither does the Nicholls, but it does a much better job of listing additional relevant essays at the foot of each entry.) A minor third is the occasional mis-attribution. (Dold given as the artist on a famous Schneeman illustration, for example.) A strong fourth is internal argument; Willis McNeilly's essay on Alfred Bester credits *The Demolished Man*, etc., as landmarks in defining the Golden Age, while

\*The only accurate criticism of a major work of reference in this field is the test of time; five years from now, we shall see how many shelves in working offices carry this book in preference to the tattered, taped-together volume of the Nicholls.

Barry Malzberg's article on the Golden Age correctly brings it to an end six years before Bester emerged as anything more than an interesting minor author, who pretty much stayed out of *Astounding* throughout most of John W. Campbell, Jr's heyday. A fifth is questionable assertion — the quote from Campbell that Malzberg cites appears to have absolutely nothing to do with the notion that Campbell had come to doubt himself as an editor. It's also not usual to see, even in history re-written, a discussion of the Golden Age that does not mention *Final Blackout* or "Fear," and does mention C.L. Moore's excellent "No Woman Born" but omits her far more influential "Judgment Night."

But let all that go in detail, and still you have the aggregate. While James Gunn as an editor is relatively reticent in pushing an individual orientation of his own, that is commendable academically but not, I think, pragmatically. For the purposes of scholarship within the field, what we have here is a work I would describe as "equivocal," and, as noted above, in the absence of true reliability, what is wanted is measurable, consistent out-spokenness. Frankly, I would wish that Malzberg had written the entire volume, and that Viking had refrained from putting last-minute

difficulties in the editor's way.

It's amazing what you find in secondhand book stores that shows you up for the incompetent you are. I have no excuse for not having reviewed Robert F. Jones's *Blood Sport*, which came out in hardback from Simon & Schuster in 1974, according to data found in the Dell reprint. If Betty Smith, of Moscow's *Twice-Sold Tales*, hadn't thrust a copy in my hands, I'd still be being dumb about it.

I suggest that locating a copy and reading it would make a nice complement to *Wheel of The Winds*. *Blood Sport* is the tale of a passage up the fabulous Hassayampa river, where ecological epochs, and myth and reality, blur amazingly as seen through the eyes of, first, a father, and then his son, in relation to the outlaw Ratnose and other possible avatars of divinity.

The front pages of the Dell edition are replete with kudos from various highly placed sources. None of them really close with what this book is like. We're in a somewhat better position, because you have recently seen my reviews of *Koko* and *Wyvern*, and otherwise read my groping attempts to grasp the now increasingly seen proposition that man is a creature much different from what he says he ought to be, ruled by passions and divini-

ties quite the opposite of what we all agree we would embrace if we had time to spare from what really motivates and creates us.

This book is like a tour of that landscape, populated by such creatures, replete on every page with temptations to entertain the un-

speakable. It is a brilliantly or almost always brilliantly done piece of outright subversion, tragic, comic, and standing pat, and I would warn you away from it if I weren't sure you could ultimately stand up to it.

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# Books to Look For

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BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Norman Spinrad, *Other Americas* (Bantam/Spectra, paper, 288pp, \$3.95)

**T**HIS COLLECTION of four long stories would be remarkable just for bringing together in book form several stories that won acclaim for Spinrad in their original publication. But the introductory essays surrounding the stories make this a coherent, powerful, and highly acidic look at America. I mean, the pH factor would turn even Reagan's hair white.

Like all good satirists, Spinrad speaks from a moral platform of absolute certitude. He not only knows what's wrong, he hates it and

wants to destroy it. Satire is not an art form for moderate people who are determined always to understand and forgive the other guy. Spinrad seeks to understand only enough to subvert, which is why even when the fiction stumbles and dies, you know that it had fire in its veins.

The most disturbing story is the last one, "La Vie Continue," which appears in print for the first time in *Other Americas*. As a story of an expatriate American writer who heroically outwits both the brownshirts of a fascist America and the KGB goons of the Soviet Union, it's dead-on satire and a terrific sci-fi read.

But Spinrad has chosen to make that writer-hero a 60-year old

Norman Spinrad. On the one hand, I have to applaud his courage in making explicit what all writers secretly do: cast ourselves in the starring roles in our stories. On the other hand, it's vaguely repulsive to read a story in which the author describes *himself* as having "defiantly unkempt" hair and "dangerous looking" eyes; in which the author declares his own writing as being so effective and powerful that mighty governments would spend millions of dollars to silence him; and in which the hero-author ends up in the catbird seat, having outsmarted everybody.

Yet let's be honest about this. Heinlein's novels usually worked exactly the same way — he just had the good taste not to actually name his heroes "Robert A. Heinlein." If Spinrad had such good taste and self-restraint he wouldn't be Spinrad. It takes an arrogant, self-absorbed, cocksure sumbitch to write satire that really gets under your skin.

This story will get under your skin.

Kristine Kathryn Rusch, ed., *Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine* (Pulphouse Publishing, Box 1227, Eugene OR 97440; 1988, cloth, 267pp; subscriptions \$17.95/issue, \$30 half-year, \$56/year)

Dean Wesley Smith has been the patron saint of new writers for

the past few years, with frequent issues of *Pulphouse Reports*, a networking fanzine for writers. But none of that folksiness and fanzine look carry over into his new publication, *Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine*. Edited by Kris Rusch, this is a quarterly story anthology, published in hardcover with a *sewn binding*. That's the trade edition — there's also a leatherbound collector's edition priced at \$50 a copy.

But you can't judge a book by its cover, right? So scan the table of contents. Fiction by Harlan Ellison, Kate Wilhelm, Charles de Lint, Edward Bryant, Steve Rasnic Tem, Michael Bishop, William F. Wu, Nina Kiriki Hoffman — have I mentioned any names you recognize? If not, what planet do you live on?

I haven't finished reading the first issue yet, but so far I can attest that these are not "trunk stories" — the authors are turning in solid work. You look for good short fiction, or you wouldn't subscribe to this magazine. So if the price tag doesn't fell you at the start, give this book a try. Like any magazine, it's a mixed bag — you won't like everything in it. But if this first issue is a sign of things to come, I think you'll like enough of the stories in *Pulphouse* to put it up there on the "keeper" shelf with the dependable magazines and anthologies of our field.

"A  
grand yarn—

a bona fide turn-the-page tale  
—all in Judith Tarr's original  
style." —Anne McCaffrey

"A  
marvelous book.

Wise with people, with horses,  
with magic."

—R.A. MacAvoy

**JUDITH  
TARR**

**A  
WIND  
IN  
CAIRO**

With rich, evocative prose,  
award-winning author Judith Tarr  
fashions the magical world of  
medieval Egypt—and an enthralling  
journey of a young prince  
transformed into a spirited stallion.  
Tragic, inspiring, witty and  
ultimately triumphant. *A Wind  
in Cairo* is a wonder of a book.



**BANTAM**



Ray Aldridge ("Floating Castles," December 1988) returns with a typically inventive SF tale about pseudo-people, abuse . . . and revenge.

# Blue Skin

**By Ray Aldridge**

**M**ARGOLO CAME TO Dilvermoon because SeedCorp hired him to trade with the aliens. I came because Margolo held my contract. I brought a hundred broken-and-healed bones hidden inside my body, but I was still beautiful.

Margolo's second-favorite possession was Geem, a pseudo-woman. When Margolo tired of hurting me, Geem renewed his enthusiasm.

Geem's projector occupied the center of our cubicle, so she could watch everything we did. I kept it there even when Margolo was gone, because I could never be sure how long he would be away. Sometimes a mission would keep him in ExoBios for weeks, and I would heal. But often he was gone for no more than a night or two.

He always took the little platinum box that held Geem's circuitry. When he was gone for a long time, I wondered what new entertainments he and Geem were planning, and my head filled with horrible fantasies. It dimin-

ished the temporary pleasure of being free of him.

The SeedCorp officer came to my door, wearing a gorgeous white uniform, carrying a small locked case. He looked into the security camera with solemn eyes.

"Yes?" When I spoke, I left the video off, though Margolo had been gone for three weeks and my bruises had faded.

"I'm here to see Delaph, contract companion to Margolo Teitch."

Animals worse than Margolo walk the corridors, so I made him put down the case and show me his paper and his blaze. Then I let him in.

He told me that his name was Legba and that Margolo was dead.

I sat down, breathless, a silly smile on my face. "How did it happen?" I asked.

"A misunderstanding with a group of Linean cultural ambassadors. You know the Lineans? A batrachian race, much like obese blue frogs, brilliant but volatile. he died quickly and painlessly, I understand." He proffered the case, and I took it. "This is yours."

I hardly heard him. I was struggling to conceal my elation.

Legba shifted from foot to foot, and several emotions flickered in rapid order across his face: irritation, disgust, resolution. He cleared his throat at length. "What," he asked, "provision did he lead you to believe he made for you? In case of his death or disappearance?"

"Those provisions are a matter of contract," I said, but already I knew something was wrong.

"May I see your copy of the contract?"

I held out my wrist, wordlessly, and he clamped an indicator cuff around it. He wore a tiny screen/touchboard on his forearm, and it took him only a moment to compare my copy with the one Margolo had filed with SeedCorp.

Then he showed me how Margolo had cheated me of everything: the cubicle, the food and clothing allowance, the air-and-water taxes, the medical plan. All the things Margolo had promised me, through all those painful nights. "I won't live long, Delaph," he would say. "Sooner or later, I'll spit when I should have whistled, and something will bite my head off. It's dangerous, haggling with the wogs. Wait a bit, and you'll have it all."

Often, at those moments, I would be unable to speak, but I would nod.

"I know you don't like the things we do, Delaph," he would whisper.

"That's the way it has to be; you'd be no good to me otherwise."

"Tell me," Legba said as he stood at the door. "What made you sell your contract to a man like Margolo?"

His curiosity surprised me. "Margolo found me in one of the Holding Arks. Have you ever been on the Arks, Legba? I had to claw my way through a hundred other little girls to offer him my contract. I'd go to the public euthanasium before I would go back to the Arks."

After he was gone, I examined the contents of the case. I lifted out the bundle of soft black leather in which Margolo had kept his collection of antique dental tools. Then there was a dead dataslate with a big hole burned through the center, splashed with a little of Margolo's blood. At the bottom I found Geem's platinum box.

I paid my fees on a daily basis, week after week, until my credit was nearly gone, trying to think of some way to keep my freedom.

I sold everything but Margolo's tools and Geem, and I could not understand why I kept her. Finally, I took her to a broker, who offered me less than three weeks' fees for her. "I'd get more value from smashing her," I said, and the broker shrugged. I took her back to the empty cubicle.

The only thing of value I had to sell was my contract. I was sifting the offerings in the datastream, when Legba came again.

Legba seemed less gloomy this time. When I let him in, he held up a black slab the precise size and shape of a pseudo-person's case. It was featureless, except for a square of blue centered in the top.

"Good news," he said, speaking in a hearty voice. "Through an oversight, not all of your late owner's effects were returned to you. Higher Authorities apologize — and wish to make amends." His voice dropped. "We want you to be our guest in SeedCorp housing." He beamed and set the black object in my lap.

"What is this?"

"Your late owner."

Legba explained it all to me, his smooth face earnest.

The Lineans had taken an impression of Margolo's personality, in case they had acted mistakenly. They gave the press to the SeedCorp representa-



tives who went to confer with them after the mishap.

"See here," Legba said, picking up the black slab and turning it over. "They analyzed the design of your late owner's pseudo-woman. Geem, isn't that her name? The interface they built is compatible with our tech, you see. Clever frogs!"

He stopped and looked around the cubicle. "You have no projector? SeedCorp will lend you one, for as long as you remain in SeedCorp housing."

He stood to go. "That's a fine piece of work." He laid the black slab back in my lap. "SeedCorp would pay a great deal to know how they did it. Look." He pointed at the blue square. "At the time of your former owner's death, he was wearing blue body stain, attempting imitative diplomacy. The Lineans misunderstood again; they thought the color might have some religious significance, so they preserved it."

Legba's eyes sparkled with genuine enthushaism. "Here, touch it," he said, and took hold of my hand. He pressed my fingers to the blue spot. It was warm and soft, and after a moment I realized that it was skin. Then it seemed to me that the skin twitched under my touch.

"Yes," Legba said. "It's his skin. But here's the really clever thing. All the nerve endings that populated his original body are crowded into this tiny patch. Imagine the possibilities, Delaph. We'd really love to know how they did it. Margolo claims he doesn't know anything about the process." Legba gave me a knowing look. "But from hints the Lineans dropped, we know he's lying." Legba put a friendly hand on my shoulder. "You'll let us know if he says anything about it, won't you? There will be a reward, a substantial reward."

**T**HE PROJECTOR Legba promised arrived almost immediately, but at first I made no use of it.

Margolo lay gathering dust, skin-side down, on the soft flooring where I had dropped him. I made wide detours around him as I moved about the cubicle. I could not make up my mind how I felt. Sometimes I was terrified, wanted to push the thing to the dimmest corner of the cubicle and pile something on him so I would never see him and be tempted. But other times I wanted to put him in the projector, and taunt him with his death, and my survival.

But I never did. A few nights later I went to a euphorium and found a man. As soon as I let him into the cubicle, I knew I had made a mistake. After, I lay still on the bed, and he walked about the cubicle, prying into the

cupboards, sliding aside the storage bin covers. He came across Geem's case and held it up with a cry of pleasure. "What's this?"

When I did not answer, he hit me, though not hard enough to split the skin. He went to the projector and set Geem's case on the sensor. She took form in the projector's field, naked, sitting cross-legged, pale hair spilling down her dark, wiry body. She was sharp everywhere: sharp, predatory face; elbows and knees like bony pickaxes; tiny, sharp breasts; sharp fingernails. Even her red-painted toenails were long and sharp, as if she were ready to climb trees barefoot. She leaned forward, glaring at me. "Where's Margolo?" she asked in that high, sharp voice.

"Dead," I answered, and I felt a warm pleasure, almost sexual, for the first time that night.

The man replaced her case with Margolo's. Margolo rose in the projector like a demon, still blue and bearing marks of torment on his pseudo-body. His hair was wild; his eyes were fiery.

The two of them were fast friends immediately.

Finally, when it was almost morning, the man left. I locked the door and turned to look at Margolo. He glowed in the projector's field, smiling. "Slut," he said, conversationally.

I reached to pull his case, and he spoke quickly. "Wait. Do you know why I'm home, instead of at SeedCorp? Surely you've been curious; you're not a stupid woman."

I pulled my hand back. "Why?"

"Because I begged them not to send me here. They cut me up, but they had no finesse; they almost killed me. No resurrection this time. 'Don't give me to Delaph,' I screamed. 'Oh no, not that. She'll take an awful revenge,' I wailed. 'Tell us,' they said, 'or we'll give you to her.' I didn't tell them; they sent me here, and now we'll arrange a new life, won't we?"

Death had not increased his wisdom. When he looked at me, he still saw a victim. I understood this with almost melodramatic certainty and suddenness. "Our contract is terminated," I said, and jerked his case from the projector, before he could make a bigger fool of himself, before he could give away anything more.

It took me three days to find SeedCorp's pinpoint camera, hidden in a deep groove in the edge of a cabinet door. It was no more than a speck of crimson, a ruby half-sphere supported by a minute black cowl.

The next morning I went to the rotunda where the contract brokers do business. It took me three hours to find a good enough price. I sold my option to a broker who represented a slash'n'flash franchiser. I had sixty days to spend the credit before I went to my new profession.

The broker sat inside a horseshoe desk, a tall, thin, elderly man, dressed beautifully in an antique style. His narrow old face was transparent; I could almost see the skull beneath. His eyes were prosthetic, bright metal from corner to corner. "You're certain you understand the terms of employment, dear? That you may be required to perform as often as once a month, for a period of three years or until you wear out. Also, they are not liable, should reconstruction at some point prove impossible. Are you sure? A contract as a domestic wouldn't pay as well, but you might enjoy it more." He said this in a wheezy monotone, and then he offered me the credit cable.

I fed the credit into my wrist. "Oh, I understand." I did not care. In sixty days I would be permanently dead, one way or another, or I could pay the indemnity and buy back my contract.

Then I went down into Howlytown, where the chipleggers lived in their fortified corridors, and SeedCorp dared not go.

Figgatoi was heavily cyborged, as were most of the chipleggers. One arm was of black monomol, with a band of red gemstones set into a circle around the wrist. Half of his face was blue surgical plastic. Both eyes had been replaced by multiplier optics, and I glimpsed shifting mechanisms moving behind the dark lenses.

He sat by a bench heaped with probes and analyzers. He looked at me expectantly. "Well?"

I told him about the camera, and he nodded. "You're small fry," he said. He showed me a tiny mechanism. "Look, this is what you need. You stick it to the cupboard next to the bug, right? It soaks up a few days of your life, and when it has enough innocent images, it starts synthesizing — cut and paste, you see. You put it over the bug; it feeds the bogus vid to whoever's watching, and meanwhile you do what you have to do."

The device cost over half of my credit. On the way back up, I bought a few stabs of Black Silk, in case SeedCorp was watching and wondering why I had gone down into Howlytown. Perhaps SeedCorp would believe I planned to numb myself.

In my cubicle I pressed the device to the cupboard door above the bug. For several days thereafter, I led an unimaginative existence. I cooked; I ate; I sat in front of the projector and stared moodily at it. One morning I glanced at the cupboard and saw an amber gleam, the ready light. I went to get a glass, and was able to brush the device down into position over the bug.

For a bit I did nothing but enjoy the lovely sensation of being unwatched. Then I put Margolo's case in the projector.

He bloomed into annoyed life. His wounds had faded, but he was now more angry than elated. "Bitch," he said. "Don't ever do that again."

"Do what, Margolo?"

"You know what I mean. Don't ever take me out of the projector, until I tell you to."

I laughed. "Or else what?"

His face grew dark. "I know something that SeedCorp wants to know. Help me get to someone who'll protect me and buy what I know, and I'll make you rich."

"So, what is this valuable secret?"

His face turned mulish. "I won't say. You don't need to know."

This time I laughed a long time, and he shouted at me, red-faced, until I turned his volume down. "You truly believe I'm stupid enough to trust you twice, Margolo? No, you'll just have to tell me what you know, and I'll judge its value."

His eyes bulged, and he screamed at me, though his screams were like whispers. It was an amusing effect.

I went to the bin where I had put the little bundle of sharp things and selected a dental hook. I bent over the projector where the case lay, with its little patch of blue skin uppermost. "Remember," I said, "when you told me how pain lays bare the basic morphology of the mind? And how 'pain thins us down to ourselves? Wasn't that the way you put it?"

I went about my work. I experimented until I found the spot on the blue patch where a touch of the hook would send needles of agony through his eyes. After a while I had to turn the volume down again; his screams were no longer amusing.

It didn't take very long before he broke and babbled all his secrets into my recorder — the details of the Linean process that makes possible the mating of a pseudo-person to living flesh, the process that has made me so wealthy.

I paid the rest of my credit to a free-lance emancipator. She waited in the cubicle with me until the SeedCorp assassin arrived, and then she killed it. She guarded me competently while I negotiated for the process rights, and I eventually bought her contract. She is still with me, all these years later.

I spend most of my time now at my estate on Green, that perfect planet. I keep Margolo on a high shelf, in a case full of other curios. The soft midafternoon light falls across his skin in slanting bars, all year long.

I have not touched his flesh in twenty years, but occasionally I take him down and put him in the projector. Though he begs me for any sensation, even pain, I never reply; I just sit there, remembering.

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*As everyone, especially Kedrigern the wizard, knows, there's nothing worse than a gnome gone bad . . .*

# ALASKA

**By John Morressy**



LIGHT TOUCH ON HIS shoulder woke Kedrigern from a dreamless nap. He opened his

eyes and immediately, with a little cry of annoyance, shut them tightly against the glare of the afternoon sun.

"Yah, yah," said a subdued voice beside him.

Shielding his eyes with one hand, he sat up. He could see, over the arm of his chair, the bald, warty head and tiny eyes of his house-troll. Those eyes were now rounded, and the little creature was quivering with excitement.

"What is it, Spot?" the wizard asked.

"Yah," said the house-troll urgently. It extended an oversized hand toward the road and repeated, "Yah."

Still shielding his eyes, Kedrigern looked in the direction Spot had indicated. He saw nothing. Knowing that Spot's eyes, though no bigger than cherry pits, were keen as a hawk's, he fumbled in his tunic and drew out

the silver medallion of his guild. Raising it to his eye, he sighted through the Aperture of True Vision. The cause of Spot's concern became clear.

At the foot of the long hill, where the road emerged from the dense wood, were two mounted figures. First came a larger man on a white stallion, and behind him a youth on a pony. Trailing the youth were a well-laden pack mule and a great gray war-horse. It was a knight and his squire and equipage, and the whole train was heading for Kedrigern's little cottage. He let the medallion fall, rubbed his eye, and groaned in frustration.

"Is your eye all right?" Princess inquired, fluttering from the house to come down lightly at his side.

"Yes. Yes, my dear, I'm all right."

She looked down on him solicitously. "You rubbed your eye, and you sounded as if you were in pain."

"My eye is fine. That's not why I groaned."

"Well, *something* must be wrong. Spot is all anxious and jumpy, and you sound upset. What's the matter?"

"We're having visitors," he said with profound loathing.

"Visitors? Company!?" Princess cried joyously. She rose, with a soft hum of her little wings, clapping her hands and laughing for delight.

"Yes, visitors. A great unruly mob of drunken brawlers trampling over everything, shouting and swearing and smashing things. . . . I'll probably have to spell the lot of them if we're to have any peace and quiet. And of course they'll demand our best food and wine, and stabling for their horses," said the wizard, climbing to his feet, gesturing wildly, his face reddening. "And I suppose they'll expect to be entertained, too, and . . . and. . . ." He grew inarticulate with outrage.

"Are you finished?" Princess asked coolly.

"For the time being."

"How many knights are there?"

Looking away, he muttered, "One. And his squire. And three horses. And a mule."

"That really isn't a mob."

"You don't know knights and squires, my dear."

"Of course I know knights and squires! I'm a princess! Didn't I grow up surrounded by knights and squires?" she retorted.

"I suppose so. You keep saying you don't remember."

"I may not remember all the details, but I recall the general atmosphere of my father's court very clearly. It was not riotous, whatever you may have read, or heard. Knights are chivalrous and courteous and brave, and they're usually charming company. They recite romances and sing ballads, and most of them can play the lute."

"Badly," he muttered sourly.

Princess gave him a cool glance. "Quite well, actually."

"Maybe. But *all* of them can play the sword, and the mace, and the battle-ax, and the lance, and they do so at every opportunity. Guest or no guest, knight or squire or serf, anyone who starts brandishing weapons in this house will be turned into something nasty forthwith."

"No danger of that. Knights know how to behave," said Princess with utter certainty.

"Oh, do they? Do they really? Do you mean that Round Table gang? They're the best of the lot, and just look at them, always squabbling among themselves, brothers fighting brothers, uncles hunting down their nephews, fathers bashing sons. And half the time they don't know which is which, the way they carry on with women — when they're not carrying them off."

"I take it you're finished now," Princess said. Her tone suggested that to be finished was the wiser course. Kedrigern nodded, and she went on, "Then you'd better change into something a little more dignified." Noticing his irate look, she quickly said, "No, no, I mean change your clothing. Put on the dark green tunic. And brush off your boots."

"Oh. All right, my dear. Should I do anything else?"

"Leave everything to Spot. Hurry now, so you'll be here to greet our guests when they arrive," said Princess, shooing him inside with urgent gestures.

Guests indeed, he thought bitterly as he walked into the cool, shaded interior of the cottage. *Intruders* is the word called for; *interlopers* is better; *invaders* is better still. No decency, no consideration, no respect. Hardly better than barbarians, bursting in on a man's calm and privacy, bringing the noise and squalor of the world with them like a nasty smell that will linger in the house for weeks after they've gone.

Kedrigern disliked the world beyond Silent Thunder Mountain, and most of the things and people in it. He preferred to venture from his cottage only when it was essential for the well-being of an old client or



when the reward offered for his services was sufficient to compensate for the inevitable horrors of travel: i.e., exorbitant. His wife, on the other hand, loved to travel, to visit, to entertain and be entertained, to move in company, to see new places and meet new people and, when that was not possible, to revisit old friends and familiar scenes. Conceding the obvious fact that princesses are raised differently from wizards, Kedrigern had learned to compromise. But however much he altered his behavior, his outlook remained unchanged: travel was nothing more than going out of one's way — literally — to be uncomfortable, and he hated it. He did not much like travelers, either, particularly when their destination was his cottage. They all wanted him to go somewhere he did not wish to be and do something he preferred to avoid.

This knight, he was certain, would be like all the rest: off on a quest, looking for someone or something to bash, hack, and pummel for the sake of honor and glory or the favor of some fair lady. It's little they have to do, any of them, Kedrigern thought sourly, or they wouldn't have time for such foolishness. Why can't they play chess, or read aloud to one another, or plant gardens? Them and their blasted chivalry. It was all such humbug.

Kedrigern emerged dressed in a clean, plainly cut tunic of dark green homespun stuff, his old brown trousers tucked into comfortable, well-worn boots that had been freshly dusted off. Princess and Spot were nowhere to be seen; he assumed that they were busy withindoors. He went to the front gate to await the arrival of the knight and squire, who were now in plain view, approaching at an unhurried pace.

When they were close enough for facial features and expressions to be distinguished, and Kedrigern could see that the knight was young, with dust-coated blond hair and dark eyes and a rudimentary mustache, he raised a hand in salutation. The knight reined in about ten feet from the gate, and his squire drew up just behind him, on his right.

"Good day to you, cottager," said the knight.

"And to you, sir knight," Kedrigern replied. Polite youngster, he thought, but none too bright. Couldn't tell a wizard from a cottager. Probably been hit on the head in the tiltyard too many times for his own good.

"Tell me, my good man, is this Silent Thunder Mountain?"

"It is indeed, sir knight."

"Ah, then my direction holds. And is it —"

The knight stopped in mid-question, sprang from the saddle, and bowed

low. Kedrigern turned and saw Princess approaching. She had folded her wings flat and thrown a gray cloak over her shoulders. Her dark hair shone, and her simple golden coronet gleamed in the sun.

"Turll of the Bronze Shield, at your service, my lady," said the knight. He gestured to his squire, who held up a large bronze shield to verify his master's title.

"Welcome, Sir Turll. My name is Princess. This is my husband, Kedrigern," she said.

Turll gave a start, looked at Kedrigern, then at Princess, grinned, and turned to his squire, who returned the grin and clapped his hands enthusiastically. "Kedrigern, the great wizard who purged the evil from the Desolation of the Loser Kings? And Princess, who turned the wicked Grodz into a toad?"

"The very same," said Princess with a smile.

"Then I am the most fortunate of men! I had hoped to find you, but I was told you were on a great quest."

"We got back early," Kedrigern said unhappily.

Turll's face fell. "But Master Kedrigern must think me a fool — I mistook you for a cottager. Can you forgive me?"

Before the wizard could frame a dignified and kindly response, Princess said, "Don't give it another thought, Turll. People are always mistaking my husband for a cottager, or a scribe, or a merchant, and it's his own fault. He he refuses to dress in a manner befitting his profession. He won't even grow a long silken beard. So there's no need to apologize."

"You're forgiven, Turll," Kedrigern quickly added.

"Now, you must stop to take some refreshment, and tell us all the news. Have your squire take the horses to the stable, and I'll have Spot bring out a snack."

"My lady is too kind," said Turll with a bow and a flourish.

"She certainly is," Kedrigern muttered under his breath, adding aloud, "Am I to understand that you've been seeking us, Turll?"

"I have, Master Kedrigern. I am a knight as yet untested, on a quest perilous."

"And you need help professional?"

"I do. I must learn the ways of gnomes if I am to have any hope of succeeding in my quest."

Kedrigern brightened. "All you want is information, then? You don't

want me going off into some accursed wilderness with you?"

"I would not dream of imposing on the time of such a renowned and busy wizard — especially since the fortunes of my family have declined in the past few generations, under the curse of Cashalane."

"Cashalane? That miserable old witch?"

"Yes, Master Kedrigern, it was she who —" Turll stopped short as his squire went into a series of vigorous gesticulations, like a man throwing a fit. "Please excuse me," said the knight, responding with lively gestures of his own. Kedrigern and Princess exchanged a quick glance of bewilderment, but said nothing. The dumb show went on, with animation on both sides, for several minutes. At last, Turll folded his arms; the squire nodded, and, saluting, he led the animals to the stable.

"Forgive the interruption, I beg you. My squire, Jeniby, does not speak," said Turll.

"The poor lad," Princess murmured. "Is it because of the family curse?"

"Oh no, my lady. Well, not directly. It was entirely his own idea. He has vowed to speak no word until I have rescued the fair Floramella, mistress of my heart."

"What loyalty! What devotion!" said Princess, her eyes shining.

"I rather wish he'd consulted me first. It's very loyal and all that, but it can be extremely inconvenient when one is in a hurry . . . all that waving, you know."

The distant flapping of feet and an echoing "Yah" announced the approach of Spot with refreshments. To forestall unpleasantness, Kedrigern asked, "You haven't taken any vow to attack trolls, have you, Turll?"

"No, Master Kedrigern. My quarrel is with gnomes."

"Good. We have a troll to help out around the house, you see. Handy little chap. We call it 'Spot.' Ah, here it comes," said the wizard, as the knee-high house-troll came caroming out the front door and skidded to a halt before them, holding aloft a tray on which rested a tall pitcher of ale and four mugs. Not a drop spilled.

"Well done, Spot. You can leave everything here. I'll pour," said Kedrigern.

"I'm glad you warned me, Master Kedrigern. I would have considered Spot a gnome."

"Oh, dear me, no. Trolls and gnomes have nothing in common except a predilection for subterranean residence. No resemblance at all. Gnomes

look like wizened little men and women. Trolls look like . . . well, Spot is one of the better-looking trolls I've encountered. And one of the smallest. Of course, Spot is still very young. In another century or so, it will start growing."

"Keddie, you're talking shop," Princess admonished him. "Perhaps Turll would simply like to relax in peace."

"Oh no, my lady, quite the contrary," Turll assured her. "I must learn gnome-lore, the more the better. It is my only hope."

"You mentioned your interest in gnomes earlier, and then you spoke of rescuing a fair lady. Is there some connection?" Kedrigern asked.

"There is, good master. My Floramella, the fairest of princesses — of unmarried princesses — has been carried off by a gnome."

"Carried off?" Princess repeated incredulously. "Gnomes are strong for their size, but. . ."

"This was a big gnome, my lady. A very big gnome. A *giant* gnome."

Kedrigern reached out to seize Turll's wrist in a firm grip. "Are you quite sure of that?" he snapped.

"Her entire family witnessed the dastardly act. It occurred at the local spring festival, just as Floramella entered, dressed all in green, a vision of loveliness. There can be no doubt."

"Then this is a very serious business, my boy," said the wizard. His expression was grave.

"Aren't you exaggerating the danger, Keddie? The worst thing a gnome can do to a princess is bore her to tears," Princess objected.

"Ordinarily, that's true, my dear. Gnomes are among the most boring little people in creation. But we're dealing here with a giant gnome, and when a gnome gets big, he's gone bad. It's something every gnome family fears . . . a rare occurrence, but invariably tragic in its consequences."

"Tragic? Oh, my fair Floramella!" cried Turll. He staggered, flung up his hands, and fell in a swoon.

"Poor lovesick boy," Princess said.

"When Jeniby is finished in the stable, we'll have him lug the poor lovesick boy inside. Meanwhile, I'll do some research into—" A shrill, wordless cry of terror interrupted the wizard, and Jeniby burst from the stable, pale and wild-eyed, waving his arms wildly. Kedrigern snapped his fingers in chagrin. "I forgot to tell him about our horses."

"It's all right," Princess reassured him. "I'm sure his vow permits an occasional scream."

WHEN HE regained his senses, Turll was persuaded to stay for dinner and spend the night at the cottage. Princess listened patiently and sympathetically to his ardent protestations of undying love and eternal devotion to Floramella, paled appropriately at his promises of bloody revenge should a single flaxen hair of her fair head be disturbed, and then settled back comfortably to hear an update of the news of the neighboring kingdoms, principalities, dukedoms, palatinates, provinces, territories, domains, and dominions. Since Turll had to check most of his facts with Jeniby, his narration was lengthy, with frequent chiromantic interludes, and went on well past the accustomed dinner hour, until Kedrigern finally rejoined the company. Under the wizard's arm was a thick book bound in green. He was solemn of countenance, pensive of mien, and empty of stomach, and his message was that there would be no further talk until after dinner.

Spot, who was a capable chef when carefully supervised, served up a splendid meal this night: a thick soup, a civet of hare, starling pie, a stew, finely minced venison, lampreys in galantine, and roast capons, with frumenty, fruit, and nuts for dessert. The food was enhanced by wines from the vineyards of a satisfied client, Vosconu the Openhanded. Turll was lavish in his praise, and Jeniby expressed his satisfaction as best he could by gestures, overeating, and exaggerated moans of delight.

When dinner was over, they rose from the table with many a satisfied sigh and took their places before the fire. Kedrigern opened the green book, checked several passages he had marked off, and cleared his throat.

"The phenomenon of a gnome going bad is uncommon, but the symptoms have been noted and recorded. First comes melancholy, and withdrawal from community affairs. Second is molting: hair and beard disappear completely, though the bushy eyebrows remain. At this point the afflicted gnome is moved out-of-doors, because the third step is rapid growth. The little fellow bursts right out of his clothing," he began.

"But Master Kedrigern, all who saw the creature stated that he was clad in the garb of a typical gnome!" Turll interjected.

"As, no doubt, he was," said the wizard patiently. "Gnomes are a prudish lot. The thought of one of their number crashing about in the woodland

stark naked greatly distresses them. So every gnome community keeps an oversized suit of clothing on hand, just in case. In the interest of decency."

"I see."

"Good. To continue, then: in step four, the gnome, now twice human size or more, develops an irresistible craving for beautiful young princesses. He will wade any moat, batter down any gate, scale any wall, to attain his objective. Once having captured a beautiful young princess, he carries her off to a secluded place, where he —"

"Stop! I can't bear to hear more! One more word and I swoon!" Turll cried, burying his face in his hands.

"Must you go on?" Princess said anxiously.

"I must. He takes her to a secluded place, where he puts her down and then runs off to look for another princess."

Turll looked up, astonished. "He runs off?"

"He does. As I said, gnomes are prudes. And the ones who get to this stage are disoriented as well. They want to carry off beautiful princesses, but they don't know what to do once they've got them. They may carry off half a dozen before they're stopped."

"But then she's safe — my Floramella is safe!"

"Well . . . her virtue is safe, and that's a comfort. But she stands a good chance of dying from starvation, thirst, exposure, misadventure, savaging by wild beasts, or sheer terror. How long is it since she was taken?"

"Five days."

"If I were you, Turll, I'd be off first thing in the morning. There's no time to lose."

"Whither shall I seek her, Master Kedrigern? The giant gnome came in this direction, but I have no idea where he might have left poor Floramella."

"There's a small community of gnomes a day's ride from here. They might know something. I'll draw you a map, so —"

"We will accompany you on your quest, Turll," Princess broke in. .

With a look of dismay, the wizard said, "But my dear —"

"We must!" she repeated, stamping her dainty foot and looking with blazing eyes at each of the men in turn. "Turll is as interested in spitting that overgrown gnome on his lance as he is in finding Floramella, and he'll be trying to do both, and he probably won't manage to do either. Think of the poor child, alone in the dark woods, jellied with fear, racked with

hunger, drenched to the skin . . . her feet bruised, her hands numbed . . . her hopes dwindling with each passing hour!"

"Floramella was never a light eater, my lady. And she was wearing her warmest cloak," Turll said.

"And think of her feelings!" Princess went on, ignoring the interruption. "To be carried off and then abandoned like a sack of dirty laundry while your abductor goes charging after another woman! It's humiliating, that's what it is. And you're not even mildly disturbed by the fact. Men are all alike."

"My dear, you're being unfair. It wasn't a man who carried her off. It was a gnome," Kedrigern pointed out, his voice wounded.

"Little men are all alike, too."

Jeniby burst into a flurry of urgent gestures. Turll observed him, nodded, and said, "Jeniby reminds us that the weather has been mild this past week. There is yet hope."

"Not the way you're handling it. Any of you," Princess snapped, turning to dart a challenging glance at Kedrigern. "You want to draw a little map and then go off to your workroom and forget the whole thing. And you" —addressing Turll — "when your fair lady is carried off by a gnome, go running to a wizard for information instead of staying on the gnome's track, relentlessly, day and night, neither eating nor sleeping until Floramella is safe in your arms — if she cares to be, which I seriously doubt after the way you've botched everything so far." Turning to Jeniby, she snapped, "And you can stop waving your arms and try to do something useful."

"My lady, we are your slaves. Only command us," Turll said, flinging himself to one knee before her, arms wide in supplication.

"Now, just a minute," Kedrigern began. He got no further.

"We leave at dawn. You three will seek the gnome settlement. I will fly overhead and search the woods for —"

"Fly?" Turll blurted in bewilderment.

"Yes, fly. What do you think wings are for, to churn butter?"

"Wings?" Turll's voice was faint.

With a sigh of sheer exasperation, Princess rose, flung aside her light surcoat with a sweeping gesture, and unfurled her compact opalescent wings. As Turll and Jeniby looked on in awe, she rose with a soft hum, circled the room, and came lightly to rest on the corner of the mantel.

"You can fly," Turll said, almost inaudibly.

"I certainly can. And now I'm flying off to pack for our quest. Remember — we leave at dawn," said Princess, rising from the mantel and soaring from the room.

"I was a bit abrupt last night, wasn't I?" said Princess as they made their way down the mountain next morning.

"Perhaps just a bit," Kedrigern said.

"I couldn't help myself. There we all were, full and warm and comfortable and safe, and that poor child Floramella huddled in the cold and dark, slowly wasting away from hunger and thirst. Nobody was *doing* anything!"

"Something will be done," said the wizard, pausing to cover a yawn. "The gnomes will help us. They want to avoid scandal."

"Yes, but you would have left it up to Turll. He probably couldn't have found the gnomes, even with a map and clear directions; and if he did manage to stumble upon them, he wouldn't have understood what they told him, or would have forgotten it, if they talked to him at all — which, given Turll, seems unlikely. He's the sort to burst upon them, threatening and making demands, and have them all disappear. And then he'd swoon."

"It's possible," Kedrigern conceded lukewarmly.

"It's just about certain. And if he does find this big gnome, he's going to need your help. Turll's handsome, and devoted, and probably brave enough, but. . . ."

"But?"

"Well, he impresses me as a man who's done too much jousting without a properly padded helmet. I think he could get lost inside his own armor. And that squire of his is no help."

Kedrigern did not reply at once. Finally he said, "I must confess I agree, my dear."

"So you admit I did the right thing."

"Much as I dislike traveling — especially at this hour — and distasteful as I find it to go off on a quest . . . yes, you did the right thing. Floramella wouldn't have had a chance if we'd left things in Turll's hands. A pity someone isn't paying for our services, though."

"Don't be mercenary."

"I'm being professional."

"Turll can pay you when this is all over and he's settled down."



Handsome, bold knights always manage to make a decent living. The main thing now is to find Floramella. Once the mist has dissipated, I'll see if I can spot any sign of her."

Princess went up in midmorning. It was a glorious day for flying, and she spent the remainder of the morning and all of the afternoon aloft, except for short breaks to rest her wings. Though she crisscrossed the woods methodically, and at different altitudes, she found no trace of the unfortunate Floramella.

Turll and Jeniby kept a respectful distance from Princess and Kedrigern, chiefly out of awe at the mounts they were riding. Princess's horse was a dainty little creature, entirely transparent. Once the morning's condensation had evaporated from its sides, it was all but invisible, except for its silver saddle, deep blue caparison, and the glints of light that flashed from its hide when the sun struck at the proper angle.

Kedrigern's horse was terrifying to behold. It stood eighteen hands high and gleamed like polished ebony. Its eyes were lozenges of fire, and a spiral silver horn jutted from its forehead. Silver hooves the size of kettles trod leaf-light on the dank trail. Except for an occasional snort of flame from its nostrils, the great beast moved in utter silence. The creature was, in fact, gentle and good-natured, but Kedrigern saw no point in broadcasting this to all. It certainly looked like the proper steed of a great and powerful wizard; the less people knew about it, the more formidable would be their speculations, and that was all to the good.

Late in the afternoon, at the end of her longest flight, Princess came to earth. She glanced at her husband sadly and lighted on her saddle without a word. After a time, Kedrigern rode to her side.

"Would you like me to massage your wings, my dear? They must be sore," he said.

She shook her head and sighed.

"You can give them a good rest. We'll make camp soon. The gnome settlement is close by," he said.

She nodded disconsolately and sighed once again. Kedrigern could tell that she preferred to be alone with her thoughts. He rode ahead until he found a grassy knoll near a rushing stream, and here he dismounted to await the others.

Jeniby pitched the tents and cared for the horses — very gingerly, in the case of Kedrigern's — while Turll and the wizard gathered wood. Be-

# One does not steal up on a gnome. Particularly not on a night when the moon is full.

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fore the sun had set, a cheery fire was burning, and the odor of grilled fish was in the air. Kedrigern announced the evening's agenda: a brief rest, and then a visit to the gnomes.

"Do you have a plan for stealing up on them unseen?" Turll asked eagerly.

"One does not steal up on a gnome. Particularly not on a night when the moon is almost full. Princess and I will approach them openly and announce ourselves as we go."

"What about us?"

"You and Jeniby will stay here and do nothing to alarm anyone in any way. Is that understood?"

It was understood, and events proceeded as Kedrigern had directed. At moonrise he and Princess donned their cloaks and set out on foot for the gnomes' settlement. When they had gone a few hundred paces, Kedrigern removed the silver medallion from around his neck and held it before him, dangling by its chain from one finger, slowly turning in the moonlight.

"This will let them know we're coming," he explained. "It gives off a signal."

"I don't hear anything," said Princess.

"You're not a gnome."

They proceeded several hundred paces farther along the moonlit forest path without a word spoken, then the wizard said, "It would help, I think, if you removed your cloak and let them see your wings."

"Why? I'm not a gnome," Princess replied crossly.

"Please, my dear."

"Keddie, it's chilly. They'll stiffen up."

"Just for a few minutes. To win their confidence."

Muttering, she unfastened her cloak and flung it to him. In the bright moonlight her wings looked like pearl. They gleamed as she slowly fluttered them. A few paces on, in a clearing, Kedrigern laid a hand on her arm. They halted. Small voices came faintly from the base of a tree, and then were still. A single piping voice almost at their feet said, "A wizard, a good fairy, and a full moon are always welcome arrivals."

Kedrigern replaced the medallion around his neck and wrapped Princess's cloak about her shoulders. Hunkering down, he softly said, "However tall the tree, its leaves must fall to the ground."

From all around them came a low murmur of approbation. The voice at their feet said, "He who eats salt is soon thirsty."

"But a drowning man does not beg for water," the wizard responded.

This time the encircling voices were more distinct in their expressions of approval, such as, "Well said," and "Hear, hear," and "Good thinking." When they subsided, there was a profound pause, and then the single voice nearby said, "The oak gives more shade than the acorn."

Kedrigern stood erect, nodded, and murmured his approval. At an urgent wink from him, Princess clapped her hands and said, "Oh, how very true!" Kedrigern stood with folded arms, silent, motionless, for a full minute before saying, "Even the king's horse has only four legs."

This was received more enthusiastically than his earlier pronouncements. There were even a few cheers from the unseen audience. Kedrigern acknowledged them by a gracious wave of his hand. It was some time before complete silence was restored.

"He who does not know one thing, knows another," the tiny interlocutor solemnly declared.

Kedrigern and Princess both applauded, and nodded with manifest agreement. The wizard cleared his throat, placed his hands on his hips, and said, "It is better to know something about nothing than to know nothing about everything."

A moment of absolute stunned silence followed, and then the clearing erupted with little shouts and cheers and wildly supportive cries. Here and there, pinpoints of light appeared, and brightened, and Princess and Kedrigern could see, illuminated by glowworm lanterns, a score or so of little men in hooded garments.

One of them mounted a flat stone and signaled for silence. To the visitors, he said, "Welcome. Your command of gnomic sayings attests to your wisdom and goodness, and you give off emanations of benign wizardry. What do you seek?"

"A gnome has gone bad and carried off a beautiful princess," said Kedrigern. Cries of anger and dismay arose from the little people, and in the fuss, two of the lanterns fell to the ground. The wizard went on, "Help me to find him, and save the princess, and I will use my power to seek a cure for him."

There was much excited murmuring, some running back and forth, and a clustering into talkative groups. Princess looked at Kedrigern in inquiry, but he was gazing resolutely ahead, unmoved by the uproar at ground level. It subsided in time, and the gnomes' spokesman gave his response.

"You have been misinformed, wizard. Gnomes do not go bad."

"As we both know well, gnomes sometimes *do* go bad; and a bad gnome is a big gnome. The one I speak of is already twice human size," said Kedrigern coolly.

After a lengthy pause and some whispered exchanges, the gnome said, "You have obviously mistaken a giant for a spoiled gnome. Giants are all bad to begin with. Gnomes are pleasant, helpful, and law-abiding."

"This giant had lost his hair and beard —"

"Shaven," the gnome interrupted.

"And wore the traditional gnome's hood and breeches —"

"Stolen."

"And carried off a beautiful princess from the bosom of her family."

The gnome hesitated for an instant, then said lamely, "Giants are notoriously impulsive in their courtship."

"This won't do. You can't cover it up. There's a bad gnome running around loose, a princess is lost somewhere in the woods, and a bold knight is pursuing them both. If you don't cooperate, there may be violence and bloodshed. Quite a bit of it."

"It's all a mistake. Gnomes are nonviolent. You must —" the gnome began, but another little voice, this one slightly cracked, cried out, "Speak truth to the wizard! Tell all, and there may be hope for my boy!"

As Kedrigern and Princess watched, a stooped and venerable gnome made his slow and painful way, with the aid of a tiny stick, to the flat stone. Shouldering the speaker aside, he tapped his stick sharply against the stone to bring the assembly to order. Kedrigern dropped to one knee, and Princess came to his side and seated herself on the grass, so they might hear the old gnome clearly.

"The unfortunate creature you seek is my youngest son, Alaska," he wheezed. "I blame myself for his tragic plight."

"It's not your fault. It can happen to any gnome," the wizard assured him.

"I should have acted sooner. When he began to mope, I blamed the

weather. When he molted, I told myself it was his diet. Only when he began to grow did I accept the truth, and by then it was too late." He stretched out a tiny hand in appeal. "Alaska's a good boy, wizard. He's not himself anymore."

"I understand."

"You'll cure him, won't you?"

"I'll try. There's no known cure. I'm a wizard, not a magician."

The aged gnome shrugged. "It's better than nothing. All right, here are the facts. One week ago this very night, Alaska shot up to more than human size. We took out the great suit, and scarcely had we made him decent, when he gave an awful cry and rushed off.

"What did he say?"

"Something about a princess. I didn't catch the exact words."

"Did anyone try to follow him?"

"No. It was almost sunrise. The big ones can take sunlight pretty well, but we find it painful. But he came back this way two nights ago."

"Was he carrying a princess?" Princess asked excitedly.

"I can't really say. Alaska had *something* in his hands. It was green, as I recall. But he was moving pretty fast, and my eyesight isn't what it used to be. I'll be 410 next Nargeldarf, you know."

"Congratulations. I'm only 170 myself."

"You're only 168. Don't exaggerate," Princess whispered disapprovingly.

"Just rounding off," was the wizard's whispered reply. Addressing the gnome, he asked, "Which direction did he go?"

"Off to the northeast. Somebody once told him there was a castle up that way."

"I see. Good," said Kedrigern with evident satisfaction. "Well, thank you very much. You've been most helpful." He rose and dusted off his knee.

"You'll help Alaska now, won't you?" said the aged gnome hopefully.

"I'll do all I can to get him back to you, safe and small," Kedrigern assured him. Helping Princess to her feet, he said, "Let us take our leave of these good folk, my dear."

"They won't even notice I'm gone. They don't pay much attention to a princess," Princess said sotto voce.

"Don't take it personally, my dear. Gnomes don't pay very close attention to anything. And these particular gnomes have a lot on their minds just now."

"I can't help it. Nobody's worried about poor Floramella, or the other princesses this big gnome may have carried off by now."

"Turll is concerned."

"Yes, but it's not a consuming, single-minded concern. Turll is as much interested in doing a bold deed as he is in rescuing Floramella."

Kedrigern did not respond until they were well out of the gnomes' hearing, and then he said, "Turll may have his chance to do both, my dear. Alaska will be coming back this way, and he will probably be carrying Floramella. We'll head northeast and meet him."

Princess stopped, tugged at Kedrigern's sleeve, and looked into his face. He halted at her side. In the moonlight she could see his confident smile.

"What makes you so sure of all this?" she demanded.

"First of all, there is no castle in the northeast. There is a *Chasm*, and it's impassable, so Alaska will have to return this way."

"Why did someone tell Alaska that he would find a castle up that way?"

"You've seen for yourself that gnomes are very inattentive. Someone must have mentioned the chasm, and Alaska thought he had said *castle*, and when he wanted to seek a beautiful princess, he naturally thought of looking in a castle. It makes perfect sense."

Princess frowned thoughtfully. "And how can you be so sure he'll be carrying Floramella?"

"Well, his father said that Alaska was carrying something green, and we know that Floramella was wearing green when she was abducted. And since there are no other beautiful princesses in the vicinity except yourself, he has probably hung on to Floramella."

"Oh, that poor girl!"

"Aside from the inevitable shaking up, Floramella's not too badly off. Gnomes aren't cruel, and they're very possessive. The only danger is that Alaska will put her down in some remote place and forget about her."

"Then we must find her tomorrow. We must!"

"It will all be up to you, my dear. You must fly as you've never flown before. I'll give your wings a good massage before we turn in."

Princess gave a brave little nod and set her jaw. Hand in hand, they returned to the campsite.

\* \* \*

NEXT MORNING at dawn they set out in a northeasterly direction. Princess went aloft while the mist was still clearing ahead of a stiff breeze, and despite buffeting winds, she stayed up with only the shortest breaks until they stopped in a grassy clearing by a pond for a light midday collation. She finished her bread and cheese quickly, took a sip of water, and flexed her wings.

"Surely you're not going up again without a rest," said Kedrigern, laying a hand on her forearm.

"I must. That poor child is out there somewhere, waiting for help."

"You'll exhaust yourself. You'll strain your wings."

"Once I've spotted Alaska, my part of the work is done. I'll rest then," Princess said. She waved a brisk farewell, took three light steps forward, and soared up and over the treetops.

"My lady Princess is plucky," said Turll, and Jeniby seconded his words with vigorous gestures signifying courage and determination.

"Her back will be stiff for six months," Kedrigern muttered with a resigned sigh as he watched her diminish and finally vanish into the bright sky. He cut himself a fresh slab of cheese, tore off a chunk of bread, and settled back against a tree trunk.

Turll was silent, but visibly fidgety. When Kedrigern had finished lunch and was flicking the larger crumbs from his tunic, the young knight blurted, "Master Kedrigern, is there really hope for Floramella? Will we find the wicked gnome, that I might wreak a just vengeance on him?"

"We'll find them, Turll. There's nowhere else for Alaska to go. He has to come back this way."

"Then shall I confront him. If I overcome, and rescue my Floramella, do you think it will count as a feat?"

Kedrigern studied Turll's eager countenance for some sign of derangement. Finding none, he replied cautiously, "I should say there's a good chance it might."

Shaking his head and gesturing in frustration, Turll said, "I have failed to make myself clear, good master. I was referring to the terms of the curse of Cashalane."

"Oh, that. Yes, of course. You mentioned it the other day," Kedrigern said, relieved.

"The curse was placed upon my grandfather, Turll of the Golden Helmet, for words he uttered in a moment of anger. It passed on to my father, Turll of the Silver Spur, and thence to me, Turll of the Bronze Shield."

"It's certainly affected the family fortunes. Another generation or two, and you'll be down to Turll of the Big Wooden Club."

"Such is my fear. The curse of Cashalane is a devilish curse. It requires a Turll to accomplish a feat, but does not specify what that feat is."

"The uncertainty must be difficult to deal with."

"It is the worst part. My grandfather did many a great feat, especially in taming giants, but all to no avail. Father also did great things. His specialty was monsters. He slew them, tamed them, restored them to human form, tricked them into self-destruction — one great feat after another, but not, alas, the right feat to free us from the curse. And if I should fail, it may be as you say . . . the decline and eventual collapse of the house of Turll."

Kedrigern shook his head in sympathy. Both men were silent for a time, and then the wizard asked, "Is Floramella aware of the family curse?"

Turll brightened; became, in fact, flushed with joy. "Yes, angelic creature that she is, she knows, and she is willing to be my wife in spite of it!"

"That's very sweet of her."

Turll nodded in eager agreement. Then his face fell, and he shook his fists at the heavens and cried in a mournful voice, "Oh, the injustice! The unfairness! One fair princess willing to marry a wretch like me, and *she's* the one to be carried off! So many beautiful princesses lie sleeping for a hundred years, or enchanted in some inconvenient way, and under awful spells — nobody would miss *them* but that stupid gnome had to find my Floramella!"

"Look at the positive side, my boy: this may be your chance to do the proper feat."

"That's true. And even if it isn't, there's the honor of the reward."

"Reward?" Kedrigern's interest quickened.

"Floramella's father, Llunn of Lavish, has promised a rich reward to the one who saves his daughter. I could not accept it, of course."

"I could," said Kedrigern, springing lightly to his feet. "To horse! We're wasting time."

Scarcely had he vaulted into the saddle of his great black steed, when



Princess dove to his side, where she hovered, breathless, for a moment, pointing up the path. By the time she could gasp, "Alaska! Coming this way!" the sound of thudding footsteps and cracking branches was already unmistakable. Turll snatched up his helmet and ran to his horse, Jeniby close behind him, bearing lance and shield. Haste made them clumsy, and Kedrigern rode before them, to intercept the fast-approaching Alaska.

"No, wizard! Let it be my hand that saves the fair Floramella, else my feat may not be accomplished!" Turll shouted.

"All right. I'll just get his attention and make sure he stops."

As the gnome burst into the clearing, bearing a limp girl in one arm, Kedrigern's horse reared, tossed its mane, and snorted twin jets of bright flame. Alaska stopped in his tracks, fascinated by the sight. When the horse settled, Kedrigern sat with folded arms, boldly staring down the oversized gnome, who peered out from under his bushy white brows in befuddled astonishment, making low, unintelligent noises.

"He's all yours, Turll," said the wizard as the knight rode to his side.

"Hear me, gnome!" Turll cried in a mighty voice. "Release that fair maid and prepare to meet thy fate!"

Alaska gave a deep, angry growl and shook his fist in a menacing gesture. Turll countered by brandishing his lance and giving his battle cry, "A Turll and a bold feat!" The gnome growled again, louder, and put Floramella down gently. He stepped before her and thumped his chest.

Turll charged. Since only about ten paces separated him and the gnome, he could not work up much speed. As he closed, Alaska reached out and grabbed the lance, lifting Turll clear out of the saddle. Eye to eye they glared at one another, then Alaska shook the knight loose.

Turll climbed to his feet and drew his sword. Alaska swung at him with the lance, narrowly missing, and Turll countered with a jab to the great toe. The gnome gave a howl of pain and slammed the lance down on the spot Turll had just vacated, and received another jab in the same toe. Howling with mingled pain and rage, he hopped up and down on his good foot, waving his fists wildly.

His hopping motion made him a difficult target. Worse yet, it presented a serious threat to Floramella, who lay unmoving perilously close to where his large foot came down. A third blow by Turll, to the same toe, made the gnome hop even higher, and this time he landed no more than a finger's breadth from the helpless maiden.

Then, as Alaska gathered himself for another hop, out of the sky came Princess, swift as a stooping hawk, and snatched Floramella by her silken girdle. As she rose, Alaska flailed out wildly, and one long fingernail caught in the hem of Princess's skirt.

Gamely, she struggled upward. The frenzied humming was audible below as she slowly rose, bearing the weight of Floramella and Alaska on her delicate wings. She hovered; she wavered; she began to sink. "Keddie! Help!" she cried.

Kedrigern raised his hand and sent a blast of magic at the thrashing gnome. A silent burst of blinding light and a great wind shook the trees; Princess shot upward, then steadied herself and began a smooth descent; a large hooded garment and a pair of oversized breeches fluttered lazily to the ground: Alaska was nowhere to be seen.

"Gnome! Alaska! Reveal thyself, miscreant!" Turll cried, waving his sword and dashing back and forth in the clearing.

"I'm afraid I've done for him. You'd better see to Floramella," Kedrigern said.

"But my feat! I have not accomplished a feat!"

"Alaska's defeated and Floramella's been rescued. Your feat is done, Turll, if that's what it was in the first place."

"You defeated Alaska, with your magic."

Kedrigern waved off the remark. "I only shook him loose from my wife. It's you who attacked him."

"And my lady Princess rescued Floramella."

Gently depositing the unconscious maid on the soft greensward, Princess touched down and said, "You made him put her down, Turll. I couldn't let her be squashed flat, could I? We beautiful princesses have to stick together."

"But I should have done *more*! All along, I had the feeling that this was the real thing, the one bold deed, the very feat of all feats that would free my family from the curse of—"

A shrill, piercing cackle of nasty laughter came from overhead, freezing Turll into silence. They looked up as one. High above them, slowly circling the clearing, rode a crone all in tattered black, riding a broomstick.

"Cashalane," whispered Kedrigern with loathing.

"You had your chance, sonny, and you wasted it, and Cashalane has come to gloat," the witch cried, cackling once again. "This could have

been the feat that freed the house of Turll, but you missed it. Too late now."

"See? I told you!" Turll said angrily, throwing down his sword and helmet and kicking at the turf.

"Cashalane, what do you mean?" wizard called to her. "The gnome is defeated, the maiden rescued. A noble feat has been done. Free the lad of your curse."

"Kedrigern? Is that you? Keep out of this, wizard! It's *my* curse!"

"Turll is my client. You're not being fair."

"Fair? Me, fair? I'm a wicked witch — I can be as unfair and nasty as I please!" Cashalane gave another bone-chilling laugh.

"No, you can't. There are rules, Cashalane. You put a curse on this lad's family, and you never told anyone how it could be lifted. 'Go do a feat' is not precise enough."

"It's precise enough for me. Besides, his feat was easy. Any fool could have figured it out, even a Turll. All he had to do was put three arrows — a gold, a silver, and a bronze — into the rump of a fleeing giant gnome. He had to be blindfolded at the time, wearing one white glove and one green stocking, and he had to hum 'The Ballad of the Four Fat Friars' backward. That's all there was to it."

"That's not a feat; that's a stunt," said Kedrigern scornfully.

"In my book, it's a feat, and now it's too late for a Turll to do it. There won't be another giant gnome in these parts for three generations. By then, the house of Turll will be reduced to beggars and swineherds." She cackled once again, triumphantly.

Princess tugged at Kedrigern's cloak. "You'll be standing here arguing all afternoon, and I'm exhausted. I'm going over under the trees and rest."

"You've certainly earned it, my dear. I'm only sorry things didn't work out better," Kedrigern said, squeezing her hand fondly. Then, to Cashalane, he said, "That's a perfectly, reasonable procedure, but you should have made it clear to the accursed."

"I wanted them to use their imagination," the witch called down.

"Why do you hate my family so, witch?" Turll asked.

"Your grandfather called me a vile, disgusting, repulsive, ugly, withered old crone."

"Perhaps he meant it as a compliment," Kedrigern suggested.

"It was the way he said it — as if I had something to be ashamed of."

"Well, this young man's done nothing to you, Cashalane. He's been very polite, all things considered. So why don't you just lift the curse?" said the wizard.

Slowly and silently, deep in thought, Cashalane flew in a great circle around the perimeter of the clearing. Twice she circled the little group, and on her third swing, just as she came over the pond, she howled, "No! I won't! Let the house of Turll be cursed forever! That'll teach them!"

At the first word, Princess shot up from the cover of the trees, unseen by the crone. She snatched the broom from under Cashalane's bony bottom, and the witch, as she uttered her final defiance, went plummeting toward the water. Kedrigern pointed, and the broom homed in on his gesture and skidded to a stop before him. He placed a foot upon the handle to secure it, and turned to greet Princess as she came down at his side, unsteady on her feet from sheer exhaustion.

"Well done, my lady!" Turll cried jubilantly.

Jeniby, free of his vow, burbled, "Yes, my lady, well done! Marvelously done! Boldly and bravely done! A most courageous act, a deed of daring, a masterstroke! Never have I seen—" until Turll silenced him.

"A clever move, my dear," said Kedrigern, putting his arm around her shoulders.

"I wasn't sure I could bring it off," she said wearily. "My wings are killing me. But it was the only chance."

"Let's see if you've persuaded Cashalane to change her mind," Kedrigern said. He took up the broom, which wriggled in his grasp. "You behave yourself, or you'll be a pile of toothpicks and kindling," he snapped. The broom was still at once, its bristles sagging in terror.

Cashalane hung from a branch, the pointed toes of her cracked and dusty shoes almost touching the surface of the pond. "Get me out of this, Kedrigern," she said in a low, nervous voice.

"That's the deepest spot right there, Turll," Kedrigern said languidly, pointing with the broom to the water beneath Cashalane's feet. "Drop something in there, and it would sink without a trace."

"Good," said Turll.

"I can't hold on much longer. Help me, Kedrigern!"

"Lift the curse."

Cashalane paused, agonized by the choice, and at last cried, "I lift the

curse! Turll and his descendents are free of my curse, and need not do a feat, now or ever!"

"And you will seek no other vengeance on them, or us, or anyone at all, ever, and there will be no tricks about this. Swear by the heads of Hecate and the wens of Sycorax."

"I swear! I swear!"

"Go get her," said Kedrigern, tossing the broom in the witch's direction. It glided swiftly over the water until it came to rest beneath her, then it rose and settled snugly under her skinny rump. When her perch was secure, she loosed her handgrip.

"All right for you, Kedrigern," she said. "And for your flying lady, too. You'll regret this, I'll —"

"Remember what you swore, Cashalane," said Kedrigern in a cold and ominous voice. "Have you forgotten what became of Wozbog when she violated that very same oath? Would you like me to remind you?"

Cashalane's face contorted. She clenched her fists and grew very pale. After a moment she calmed herself. Her bony hands dropped to her lap. "I'll be good," she whispered hoarsely, and flew off without another word or a backward glance.

Kedrigern let out a long sigh of relief. "Well, that wraps it up, Turll. You can bring Floramella home, announce the wedding, and have Llunn the Lavish deliver the reward to me. You know the directions."

Jeniby spoke up at once. "May I be the messenger? Not only am I familiar with the roads, I am loyal and trustworthy as well, and those are rare qualities in these parlous times when an enemy lurks behind every smile, travel is fraught with perils, and even the bravest knight must look with uncertainty at —"

"You may be the messenger," Turll broke in. "Leave at once. And now I must see to my fair Floramella."

"It's about time," Princess muttered.

As Turll cradled Floramella in his arms, dabbed her brow with a moist cloth, and lifted his water bottle to her lips, Kedrigern and Princess walked to the heap of clothing that lay in the middle of the clearing. Kedrigern lifted one roomy sleeve and felt the material between his fingers.

"That looks like good stuff," Princess said.

"Gnomes are skilled weavers. We should take this home. You could

make two cloaks for each of us out of the tunic alone."

"I might as well. Alaska won't be needing it anymore."

"No," said the wizard gloomily.

"I almost feel sorry for the poor creature. He didn't really hurt anyone, and if it hadn't been for him, Turll would still be cursed."

"I know," said Kedrigern, almost inaudibly.

"Did you really have to annihilate him?"

By this time, Kedrigern was feeling terrible about the whole thing. He recalled his promise to Alaska's aging father, and his heart sank at the thought of explaining his impulsive action to the old gnome. He lowered his eyes, gazing vacantly and despondently on the expanse of empty breeches.

Something in the left leg stirred, was still, then stirred again. It was about the size of a small cat. Kedrigern turned to Princess with a confident smile.

"What makes you so sure I annihilated him? Didn't you hear me promise his father I'd find a cure for the lad?" he said.

"You promised to try. But surely. . . ."

A tiny groan came from the left leg of the breeches. Kedrigern knelt, reached in, and drew out a little man, stark naked. The gnome covered his eyes against the bright sunlight, scrunched up to preserve his modesty, and groaned, "Where am I? What hit me?"

"Just a bit of magic, that's all. I'll put you inside my tunic until we can find something for you to wear, and then we'll take you home."

"He had a pouch at his belt. It should be just about the right size for him now," said Princess, scanning the ground. "There it is. I'll cut holes in it for his little arms and legs."

"I seem to remember . . . being big. Was I big?" Alaska asked from inside Kedrigern's tunic.

"Yes. Very big."

"Was I bad?"

"You might have been worse. Now you'd better rest. You've had a busy time of it. We'll take you home tonight."

Floramella was unharmed, but too weak to travel. Turll pitched a tent for her in a sunny corner of the clearing, near the pond, and there she rested. Princess and Kedrigern remained to serve as chaperones. Floramel-

la accepted Alaska's apology graciously, as did Turll, who saluted him as a valiant adversary and helped bandage his injured toe. All was harmony.

That night, Kedrigern was awakened from a sound sleep. The warning spell he had laid around their little encampment had gone off, but very mildly. Whoever was approaching was small, and probably friendly. Nevertheless, an intruder was an intruder, and not to be ignored. The wizard dragged himself from his blanket and groped for his boots. Princess stirred and mumbled.

"No cause for alarm, my dear," said Kedrigern, yawning.

"Ngff. Larm," she said in a muffled, sleepy voice.

"I'm just going to look outside."

He left the tent. Outside, wide awake, looking preposterous in his makeshift attire, Alaska was waiting. "They've come to fetch me," said the gnome. He pointed to the forest, where tiny points of light moved along close to the ground.

At Alaska's suggestion, they withdrew to a nearby tree, a huge old oak with a small mound near its base, the kind of site favored by little men. They were soon joined by Alaska's kin. There were subdued greetings,

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expression of joy, some laughter, and then a familiar voice called, "Wizard!"

"Yes?" Kedrigern replied.

"You cured my boy. He's as healthy as ever, and not a mark on him, except for his toe."

"I use only the best magic."

"You have done what no one, gnome or wizard, has ever done before. You must be rewarded."

A praiseworthy attitude, Kedrigern thought. The sort of attitude to be encouraged. But not abused. He was likely to receive a staggering reward from Llunn the Lavish, and there was no need to be greedy. Especially since Alaska's cure had been a matter of sheer luck. "What I'd really like most is the big suit of clothes Alaska was wearing during his . . . his affliction," he said.

Embarrassed silence followed his words. After a very long pause, the aged gnome said, "The great suit is a tradition in every gnome settlement, the work of many hands over many years. It will take us long to replace it. But if this is the reward you wish—"

"No, no. I couldn't think of taking it from you," said Kedrigern, waving the old gnome to silence. "I didn't realize its significance."

"All the same, you must have a reward."

Kedrigern pondered for a moment, then said brightly, "I have it! The

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gnomon on my sundial is bent, so I'm always ahead of time, or behind time, and never exactly on time. I know you make the best ones, so just give me a new gnomon and we'll call it even."

"Is this all you ask of us?"

"It's all I really need at the moment."

"Then you shall have it before the sun rises."

"Oh, there's no need to rush. I don't really have to. . . ." But his protests were vain. The little lights vanished, and all was still. Kedrigern waited for a time, but heard only the accustomed noises of the night. Eventually he became uncomfortably chilly, and returned to the tent. Princess did not move or make a sound.

Sometime later the warning spell went off again. Kedrigern groaned, stirred himself, and peeked from the tent. The sky was pale with false dawn, but he could see nothing and no one. The silence was profound. He listened for a time, even inspected the clearing through the Aperture of True Vision in his medallion. All was in order; the world was at peace. He gratefully returned to Princess's side.

Next morning, when he took up his boot, a slender bundle fell out. It was the length of his forearm, and was wrapped in soft cloth and bound with thread as fine as gossamer. It was heavy and solid. He took it outside the tent and undid it carefully, and when he pulled back the last fold of wrapping, he blinked at the sudden blaze of light as the morning sun infused a multifaceted diamond the size of his thumbnail, set into a golden gnomon engraved with words and signs of power. He gave a long, muted whistle of astonished gratitude, but he had no proper words to say, even to himself. He whistled again.

"Keddie? Have you got a lantern out there? It's awfully bright," came Princess's sleepy voice from within the tent.

"It's a gnomon. From the gnomes. For our sundial."

"From the little men?"

"There's nothing little about them, my dear. Come have a look."





# FILMS

## HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 33: *In Which the Canine of Vacuity is Wagged by the Far More Interesting Tale of O'Bannon*

**Q**UITE A bit more than a few, but less than many, years ago, I attended the premiere of a major motion picture I had written. Well, yes, I'd written it, but it had been rewritten by both the director and the producer. Not very much to its benefit, as it turned out. Which is not to say that I, as a first-time scenarist, had written a screenplay that would have given Richard Brooks or Richard Breen even twinges of envy . . . but it had some sprightly moments, this screenplay as I'd written it; and it has a few lines that I can still hear without wincing (when, in moments of masochism, I pull out the videocassette for a crawl down Memory Slough). Every once in a while, no doubt fully aware of my anhedonia as

regards this film, no doubt aware of my embarrassment at how badly the film turned out — though it made millions for the studio and production company — no doubt aware that it will cause me pain, some reincarnated dung-beetle now reborn as a fan, complete with rancid breath and overinflated opinion of his/her skills with the *bon mot*, oozes up to me in a public place and (usually loud enough to include total strangers) demands to know how I could have written such an awful film.

Well, there are all sorts of explanations for a film having gone wrong, but in this case it was probably at least one-third my fault. It was terribly directed, extravagantly and expensively produced but with an impoverishment of taste or imagination; it was miscast hideously; and rewritten till every vestige of fun or originality had been removed from my original screenplay based on a not-very-good popular

novel of the time. Which is not, I say again, to let me off the hook. It was my first film, and I thought I could do no wrong, and if I were to go back and re-read that scenario I'd certainly wince at the sophomorisms.

[Which has nothing to do with the rudeness of the human chancre who throws it up in my face in much the same way, I'm sure, that smartasses prod Roger Ebert with his having worked on the raunchy 1970 *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, directed and co-scripted with Ebert by Russ Meyer. I've seen pod-brothers of the ambulatory phlegm who gig me for [the intentionally unnamed] cinematic abomination I wrote when I was in my early thirties, more than two decades ago, who have smarmily leered at Roger and oh-so-innocently inquired how such an erudite film critic and excellent journalist could have been part of "a project like that." And I've seen that tight, brave little smile Roger substitutes for the more appropriate, but less gentlemanly, left cross to the moron's jaw, and I identify with it, because I've used it myself. And I know just how Roger feels. I can recall with agonizing clarity the night I attended the world premiere of my filmic *mea culpa*, at a great old movie palace on Hollywood Boulevard, with searchlight beams cutting wedges

out of the sky above the City of the Angels, with live tv coverage and crowds being held back behind velvet ropes, and entering the theater having been kept from seeing even one frame of the produced film *a priori* by producers and studio fearful I'd piss on their parade by way of pre-release denunciation in *Variety*. As the film was run, and the audience roared ever more often and ever more derisively at what was not intended as a comedy, I shrank within my rented tuxedo and slipped lower and lower in my seat till I could barely see the screen. I withered, understanding that before my eyes I was witnessing the ritual slaughter of my budding career as a writer of theatrical motion pictures. I was dead on, of course. There is a moment near the outset of one's career in Hollywood, when the Big Break manifests itself. Taken at the flood, that moment can stretch and carry one into a word-of-mouth security that can withstand an occasional flop. But if the moment goes sour, for whatever reasons, one can continue working, making a decent living, but there is a taint that thereafter attaches to all who are identified with the plague-bearing item. And that stigma became the word-of-mouth that lobbied against my getting other big-budget, serious writing assignments for the large

screen. It's been a long time since it all happened, and though I suffer a *frisson* of sadness for What Might Have Been, like Roger Ebert I've put it behind me, and work as skillfully as I can on the projects that do come my way. But I remember. And I suppose it is logged in my life as one of the few episodes on the list of If I Could Do It Over . . .)

So I know, to the core I know, how my friend Rockne O'Bannon feels when he tells me he has not seen, and will not accompany me and Susan to see, a screening of his first feature film, *ALIEN NATION* (20th Century Fox). I know how he feels, and I hear him explain how the producer, Gale Anne Hurd, she who was allied with, married to, separated from, director James Cameron, altered his vision. I hear him, and I sympathize, because the litany is not only one I've shrilled endlessly, but which bears within itself the echoes of artistic pain from thousands of screenwriters who came before us. He cannot bear to sit watching what became of his work, as I was forced to sit that long-ago night on Hollywood Boulevard, writhing before the projected images of corrupted invention.

Let me tell you a little about Rock O'Bannon. Not only because he is a pal of mine, or because we worked together on the 1985-86

revival of *The Twilight Zone* television series for CBS (though that is a secret agenda I would be less than forthright to conceal), but because I tell you what I truly and deeply believe: Rock O'Bannon is a writer of uncommon talent, vast promise, and urgently in need of a kick in the ass from one he knows likes and admires him. But more important, he is emblematic of the kind of men and women who are, more and more overwhelmingly, coming to be the model of young people writing films these days in a medium schizophrenic to the point of hysteria.

Here is what the studio press packet on *Alien Nation* says of Rock:

Born in Los Angeles, Rockne O'Bannon was raised in the film industry; his father was a gaffer and his mother a contract dancer at MGM. While most ten-year-olds were reading "The Hardy Boys" and comic books, he was reading screenplays smuggled home by his father. He learned the business by working in the mailroom and leading guided tours at a major studio. He went on to work as a production assistant on Lorimar's television productions *The Waltons* and *Apple's Way*.

From age eight O'Bannon knew he wanted to be a writer. His first stab at screenwriting was developing a script for what he thought was a natural spin-off of his then

favorite television series *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* entitled "Boy From U.N.C.L.E." O'Bannon continued writing screenplays through high school and upon graduation took six months off to concentrate seriously on his writing. That's when he moved from mailroom to production assistant at Lorimar.

After leaving Lorimar, he returned to college to continue his English studies, but in a short time dropped out when he got a job at MGM. He stayed there several years working in the publicity department and the story department, simultaneously writing the studio's company newspaper.

Having an office to himself afforded O'Bannon the means to continue writing scripts while working at his job. After he had written several scripts on spec, his agent submitted a script for the recently revived *Twilight Zone* television series. The producers were so impressed with his "Wordplay" episode that they hired him to write more scripts and to serve as the story editor for the first season. He went on to work as a consultant during the second season. During the hiatus, he wrote the "Life on Death Row" episode of Steven Spielberg's anthology series, *Amazing Stories*.

It was during this period that O'Bannon met *Alien Nation's* co-producer, Richard Kobritz and told

him of his story idea for the film, formerly titled *Outer Heat*. They have since formed a partnership and are developing a project which O'Bannon plans to direct with Kobritz serving as the producer.

When the producers of *The Twilight Zone* were trying to inveigle me into returning to television after ten years of voluntary abstinence from that most beguiling and lucrative of addictions, they sent me a small stack of scripts that had been accepted by CBS as correct for the re-think, contemporary version of that classic series. Several of them were knockouts, several of them were acceptable, several of them were stinkers, and one of them blew me into orbit.

It was Rock's eighteen-page, air-time-seventeen-minute story, "Wordplay." It was a marvel. Nothing less than a marvel.

If you missed it, you missed one of the classic moments of fantasy on television, and a tale of imagination that is, in my view, on a par with the very best that has ever been done in the genre of the fantastic:

A perfectly average guy wakes one odd day to find that everyone is speaking a different language. Well, not exactly. It's still English, but the words have different meanings, different uses. A brash, young guy

who works in the protagonist's company approaches him for advice. He says: "Hey, Mr. Thompson. You know that new girl in accounting? Barbie? I've been asking her out and finally, today, she says okay — but she's gonna be here in five minutes and I can't think of anyplace to take her for dinosaur. I mean, I thought of the Capitol Inn, but then that might look like I'm trying too hard. What d'you think?"

Thompson looks at him and laughs. He replies, "You're planning to take this young woman out for dinosaur, huh?"

And when the kid repeats it, confused at Thompson's wry response, Thompson thinks he's putting him on. The kid gets huffy. "Look, Mr. Thompson, if you don't want to, uh, or can't think of anyplace, I'll just ask somebody else."

It gets worse and worse. More and more words gibber and dance out of Thompson's reach. Dinosaur, for lunch. Peaches, for rain. Segregate, for clear. On and on, till people are calling him Hinge instead of Bill, and his wife, trying to tell him that their child is dying and they must get him to a hospital, shrieks, "Dark outer! Kettle rod that thought collins around! Moon tight! Moon tight!"

In seventeen minutes, Rock O'Bannon creates, complicates and solves an apocryphal human dilem-

ma that, in terms of modern fable, encapsulates the terror and helplessness of modern man's inability to orient himself in a bewildering technocratic society.

It is, in my view, simply brilliant, by every standard of writing we accept as necessary for the creation of true literature, true Art. He was twenty-eight years old when he wrote it.

I took the job on TZ, in large part, because the producers had been smart enough to snap up that script from the slush pile. If they could spot top-level writing like that, then there was hope for the series, and I might yet find myself working among artists, not sausage-merchants.

Working with Rock O'Bannon was a delight. I never thought of him as a tyro, as a youngster breaking in. He was a peer. And so he remains today.

But *Alien Nation*, his debut as a feature film writer, is a woeful, empty thing. He was thirty-two when he wrote it, last year. I'll get back to Rock, and that kick in the ass, in a moment; but first, let me review *Alien Nation* for you, so you won't waste your money seeing it.

Los Angeles. Near future. Three hundred thousand aliens, bred to be workers, slaves, beanfield hands from outer space, arrive on Earth. They look a lot like us, but are

grotty enough to be considered the new "niggers." They are shunted into a ghetto, and because they have been bred to adapt almost totally to whatever environment becomes their lot, they are soon just like all of us — shopkeepers, cops, hookers, fast-food clerks, mechanics, street thugs. Suddenly, there is a murder of a human by a "slag" (the epithet for "newcomer"). Unthinkable. So a human cop, played by James Caan, is linked with the first "newcomer" to make the grade of detective on the LAPD, Mandy Patinkin as Sam Francisco. Together they set out to solve the baffling murder, mysteriously linked to the slaying of two "newcomers."

Baffling, as in *Oh, did I nod off, dear! Did I miss anything?*

Mysterious, as in *I've got to take a leak; tell me what I missed. Want me to pick up some popcorn while I'm out there?*

And for the next 94 minutes of running time, we have the cinematic equivalent of Gerald Ford's presidency. Nothing of consequence happens.

Here is a sixteen-seventeen million dollar film that functions as a perfect soporific. It isn't even bad enough to be a howler, bad enough to spark vituperation, bad enough to become a cult favorite for those who dote on turkeys. It is just

lugubrious. Somnolent. Derivative. Empty. Yes, that's just what it is: empty calories. Not even interesting junk food. No spice, no jump, not even stupid enough to provide uncooked meat for the disputatious critic to amuse his basest instincts. It is, in the vernacular of my people, a lox. It doth but lie there and rot from the head down.

With the arrogance of the arriviste, above the credits we are told this is A GRAHAM BAKER FILM. Now, if that fails to bring you to your feet with an admixture of awe and gladness, it is because you probably never heard of Graham Baker. His previous credits are the classic draughts from the Waters of Lethe titled *The Final Conflict* and *Impulse*. If we are to judge Mr. Baker's potential from this trio of bow-wows, I suggest that the degree of directorial scintillance contained in the batch prepares Mr. Baker for a world-class dive into oblivion.

Or a return to directing television commercials in England.

As for the acting, both Terence Stamp and Mandy Patinkin are wasted, performing like shambles excised from a rough cut of *Night of the Living Dead*; James Caan looks old, tired, puffy and lackadaisical, employing the same thespic shrugs and tics we've seen him substitute for character insight before and since his outstanding

performances in *The Gambler* (1974) and *Thief* (1981); and everyone else appears to be as one with Jay McInerney's "brigades of tiny Bolivian soldiers" waiting for the Bolivian Marching Powder of cocaine to galvanize them into frenetic action.

Not only is the film slow as the erosion of mountains, but it is slovenly in its basic logic and in its tiniest details: the latter exemplified by Caan returning to his home, trying to find something to eat, eyeing the detritus of a dozen fast food banquets littering the kitchen, living room, bedroom, a vast terrain of garbage . . . and not one cockroach in sight. Trust me on this one, folks. I live in Los Angeles, and while we aren't the cockroach paradise of, say, New Orleans or New York City, it is impossible to leave that much crap lying about in the heat without sounding an orthopterous klaxon that would draw *Blattidae* from as far away as Pomona. But pristine is Caan's pad, nary an ant — black, red or white — as far as the camera eye can see.

The former is exemplified by the simplistic treatment of three hundred thousand *aliens* from outer space being plopped into the middle of Los Angeles. There is virtually no social or physical alteration in the makeup of the city as we know it today. Everyone dresses the same, talks the same, acts the same, and

for a budget of 16-17 million, the minutiae of a major new immigrant population is nil. The only one that sticks in my memory is the repellent concept of fast food burger joints serving "raw beaver" (with the fur still on it) alongside the fishwich and fries.

Consider, if you will, the changes in Miami with the arrival of far fewer Cuban refugees. The changes in Los Angeles, San Diego and Orange County with the arrival of Laotians, Cambodians, Koreans and Vietnamese. The changes in New York that altered even that endlessly mutable melting pot at each new wave of Irish, Middle Europeans, Jews, Puerto Ricans. If you have no sense of history to point out the ludicrousness of what *Alien Nation* substitutes for solid sociological ideation, just compare what I've described here with the society portrayed in *Bladerunner*.

And the worst part of this imbecile determination to discount even the least venturous attempt at extrapolation, is that for 94 minutes we have *nothing original* to look at.

Coupled with that boring, overexposed, overfamiliar Los Angeles setting we've wearily endured through ten thousand flicks, is a sound mix of intrusive rock so excruciating that we cannot decipher the dialogue, which may be, on further consideration, a blessing in



disguise. Ah, yes, disguise.

Which brings us to disguise.

This is nothing more than the same old buddy-movie formula with dopey latex masks. Mask disguises for a good ole boys liaison.

And here is where I draw back my Lou Groza toe to dropkick Rock O'Bannon's ass.

The great scenarist Ring Lardner, Jr. — *The Cross of Lorraine*, *M.A.S.H.*, *Woman of the Year*, and *Tomorrow*, *The World* just to name a few — once opined: "No good film was ever made from a poor script." So, though I have made it clear that affection and respect inform my opinions of Rockne S. O'Bannon, even as I accept about one-third of the blame for that long-ago awfulness I wrote when a newcomer to the screenplay, Rock must accept the initial blame for *Alien Nation*. It's a commercially cynical idea. Rock sat there one day (I was a fly on the wall . . . this is how it happened . . . trust me) and suddenly he said aloud, "Hey, what a great obvious idea for a thriller! A cop-buddy movie with a human being and an alien! Hell, we can cast Patrick Swayze as the human and put John Candy in a funny suit for the alien! Hot shit, this'll make me a fortune!"

And he took it to market; and because he is dealing with the sort of people I noted a few columns

ago, the sort who wanted to make a tv special: "Let's do *The Wiz* . . . white!" he had no trouble selling the project. Before Gale Anne Hurd picked up on it at 20th in April of 1987, Warners and Paramount wanted it. It was a "hot" idea. Like Pete Hyams standing in front of Alan Ladd, Jr. and getting a deal to make *Outland* when he suggested, "Let's do *High Noon* in outer space." Rock O'Bannon is a cagey guy, a canny assayer of the lowered expectations, petty pretensions, and cultural illiteracy of the New Executives who run this industry. Rock is (with one important difference) the very model of the kind of writer who is hitting it big in Hollywood these days. He has his eye not on the sparrow, but on the box-office. He spots, early on, the trend for the season; and he boils it down to basics; and he pushes a simplistic version of that trendy idea couched in derivative terms that make the New Execs comfortable. He understands, as do his brethren who write films like *The Hidden* and *Robocop* and the *Nightmare on Elm Street* features, that he is dealing with men and women who are not only ignorant, but who are arrogant about their lack of knowledge. He understands that for such people, the daring offbeat original ideas are anathema. He knows on a primal level the truth of Ellison's First Law

of Movie Marketing:

PHILISTINISM MAKES LUCID  
COPY FOR DOLTS.

The important difference between Rock O'Bannon and the larger measure of his brethren, is that Rock has it in him to reach an artistic level most writers can only shade their eyes and aspire to from far below. Up there in the sun, where the air is crisp and the mind seeks to unravel the secrets of the human condition and the universe, few of us are given to exist. For the Steven De Souza's of the world, the Chris Columbuses, even the Steve Cannells, it is a summit unreachable and forever intimidating. They do the best they can, but it is the difference between Alfred Hitchcock and Brian De Palma. King Kong and Mighty Joe Young. Jefferson and Dukakis/Bush.

The kick in the ass is necessary, because Rock O'Bannon is *better*. He wrote "Wordplay." He can go there again. For him to get his foot in the feature film door with *Alien Nation* was cynical and self-destructive. Like the film, it was a calculated act of empty calories, artistic vacuum. For the soul, no surge of enrichment; there were only money and "clout" to be garnered.

For those who now ask, "Well, what's wrong with that?" I suggest you find another film columnist to read: surely we are dealing with

concepts of self-respect and responsibility forever beyond your ken. For those of you who remain, let me digress only slightly to explain why this film was doomed from the starting blocks . . . and please bear in mind that quotation from Ring Lardner, Jr.: "No good film was ever made from a poor script."

Only god and Bill Warren know where the idea of the buddy-movie began. It has to be somwhen subsequent to the Edison Kinetoscope filmstrip *The Kiss* (1896), but prior to the most recent Pee-wee Herman extravaganza. After Cain and Abel, but prior to Sly and Brigitte. After the creation of the Heaven and the Earth, but prior to Burke and Hare. If you get my *drift*: this is an old formula we're looking at.

Even before the spate of flying buddies movies — exemplified by Cagney and Pat O'Brien in 1935's *Devil Dogs of the Air* — the genre was in full swing, but the chum flick as a separate form was most obvious in the aeronautic alliances. Perhaps the lineal descent is from the first attempt to put Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson on film (about which more in a moment), though the Quirt and Flagg buddydom of the 1926 *What Price Glory?* certainly sticks out as a watershed event.

For those who contend the buddy-movie reached its highest point of originality and vigor with the 1939

*Gunga Din*, in which Cary Grant, Victor McLaglen and Doug Fairbanks, Jr. stood off Eduardo Ciannelli and his ravening hordes howling "Kill for the love of Kali," I'd like to point out that Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, who cobbled up that adventure plot, were only rewriting their 1931 hit *The Front Page*, as perfect an example of the buddy-movie as has ever been remade more times than we can count.

But by the '40's it was a staple commodity, requiring not much more thought for inclusion on a production schedule than an off-hand "Who'll we buddy-up with whom?" Or is that *who*?

A staple commodity, having manifested itself in dozens of Republic and Monogram westerns of the "Three Mesquiteers" type (and does anyone else remember that ventriloquist Max Terhune and Crash Corrigan were but two-thirds of that rootin' tootin' shootin' trio completed by John Wayne?), reprised to the point of fugue state boredom in all the Dennis Morgan-Jack Carson "Two Guys From —" comedies, the Crosby-Hope roaders, and even proffered in the Batman & Robin mode with Wild Bill Elliott as Red Ryder, Bobby Blake as Little Beaver.

Through all such flotsam and jetsam (another terrific buddy pair-

ing), the huffingpuffing exhausted idiom dragged itself into the modern era with Duncan Renaldo as The Cisco Kid and Leo Carillo as Pancho.

("Oh Seesko!" "Oh Pancho!" "Ha ha ha ha ha!" Which is the way all Saturday morning cartoons and most tv sitcoms from Lucy to Cosby end.)

This discounts all the Mr. and Mrs. North or Nick and Nora Charles *Thin Man* flicks, which really don't fit the mold, and I discount them openly just to remind you that I'm being nothing but fair in my selections as the form burgeoned in feature films when *The Defiant Ones* (1958) proved that if you made the buddy-buddy connection a bizarre one, you might triumph at the box-office using a template already hoary and creaky, because critics would tend to overlook the paucity of invention at a plot level, and focus on the acting of the principals, their "relationship": just manacle a tough-but-heart-of-gold black convict (Sidney Poitier) to a bigoted white convict (Tony Curtis), let them escape from the chain gang, and send them on the run. This was the great icon of the buddies-with-animus-toward-each-other sub-genre, most recently reprised with Secret Service bodyguard Charles Bronson "manacled and on the run" to his real-life wife, Jill Ireland, as the First Lady in

*Assassination* . . . and bounty hunter Robert De Niro "manacled and on the run" with bail-jumping Federal witness Charles Grodin in *Midnight Run*.

Seriatim, the gang-buddy idea overinflated two years later with the success of *The Magnificent Seven* (from Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*), followed by *The Professionals* in 1966, *The Dirty Dozen* in 1967, *The Devil's Brigade* in 1968, and Peckinpah's 1969 gang-buddy classic, *The Wild Bunch*, ending the decade that year with the buddy-movie that sent the entire film industry scrambling to flood the screen with chums, pals, mates . . . *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid*. And the sluice-gates were opened.

By 1971 you could spot the variations sans recourse to dowsing rod: *They Might Be Giants*, like the aforementioned *Assassination* a male-female buddy-up, recasting George C. Scott as Holmes with Joanne Woodward as Dr. Watson. (This is such an obvious duo for the perpetuation of the genre, that hardly a year goes by without a new note being sounded as coda to Conan Doyle's original duet, echoic currently with Michael Caine as the dunder-head Sherlock and Ben Kingsley as a brains-of-the-act Watson in *Without a Clue*, which I recommend unreservedly.) Other boy-girl buddy-

ups: *The Late Show* (1977) with Art Carney and Lily Tomlin, *Foul Play* (1978) with Chevy Chase and Goldie Hawn, *Hanky Panky* (1982), *Run-away* with Tom Selleck and Cynthia Rhodes and *Romancing the Stone* (both 1984), and *Stone's* sequel, *Jewel of the Nile* and *Into the Night* with Jeff Goldblum and Michelle Pfeiffer (both 1985). And that's just iceberg-tip of boy-girl buddy-movies.

To demonstrate how interchangeable these phony-friendship-flicks are, *Hanky Panky* was originally intended as a followup to the successful buddy-movies of Gene Wilder and Richard Pryor — *Silver Streak* (1976) and *Stir Crazy* (1980) — but for reasons I'm too weary to recount, Pryor's role in *Hanky Panky* was revised for Gilda Radner, and no one noticed any dichotomy.

But wait, there's more!

*Scarecrow* with Hackman and Pacino; *City Heat* with Eastwood and Reynolds; *Partners* with John Heard and Ryan O'Neal; *The Sting* with Redford and Newman; *Wise Guys* with Piscopo and De Vito; *Ishtar* with Beatty and Hoffman; *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* with John Candy and Steve Martin; *Lethal Weapon* with Mel Gibson and Danny Glover, and *Running Scared* with Billy Crystal and Gregory Hines (as we return to black and white pairings a la *The Defiant Ones*); *Buddy Buddy*, the

Billy Wilder-I.A.L. Diamond remake of the French *A Pain in the A—*, recast with Lemmon and Matthau; *Red Heat* with Schwarzenegger and Jim Belushi; another girl-boy linking that substitutes Debra Winger for Paul Newman in *Legal Eagles* with Redford; *The In-Laws* with Falk and Alan Arkin; *Mikey and Nicky* with Falk and Cassavetes; *Three Amigos!* with Chevy Chase, Martin Short and Steve Martin; *48 Hrs.* with Nolte and Eddie Murphy; *Tough Guys* with Lancaster and Douglas; *Dragnet* with Ackroyd and Tom Hanks; *Stakeout* with Dreyfuss and Emilio Estevez; *Real Men* with Belushi and John Ritter; *Number One With a Bullet* with Billy Dee Williams and Robert Carradine; and *Nighthawks* with Billy Dee Williams and Stallone.

Not to mention all the girl-girl buddy-ups — "biddy-movies"? — like *Outrageous Fortune* with Bette Midler and Shelley Long or *Big Business* with a pair of Bette Midlers and a pair of Lily Tomlins, which makes it the first buddy-buddy-buddy-buddy movie . . .

Or such offbeat pairings as those found in films like, uh, er, *A Boy and His Dog* with Vic and Blood played by Don Johnson and Tiger . . .

Or even precursors of the human-alien tieup in *Alien Nation* (which makes it an even *less* original conception) like *The Hidden* with

Michael Nouri and Kyle MacLachlan or *Enemy Mine* with Dennis Quaid and Lou Gossett, Jr. And all of them foreshadowed in print by Isaac Asimov with his human-robot pairing of R. Daneel Olivaw and Lije Baley in *CAVES OF STEEL*, *et al.*

Which list, rendered here as exhausting (though hardly exhaustive) evidence that the buddy-buddy idea was worn to the nub long before Rock O'Bannon came to it, should indicate just how hackneyed and cynical is the core of *Alien Nation*.

We would expect no better from a producer like Gale Anne Hurd, whose contract with 20th Century Fox was not picked up this summer in large part because of the disposability of *Alien Nation*; but we are *required* to expect more from Rockne O'Bannon.

Now here's the good news.

O'Bannon won't be killed by this film. Unlike my situation, which parallels Rock's, it will do him no harm. *Alien Nation* is so empty of calories, so forgettable, that it will not cast a pall over his name. With the sharp eyes and Me Decade smarts of his scriptwriting brethren, Rock understood that to get what he wanted in this business, he had to toss out a commercial film like this one. It got *made*. And that is the lowest factor of survival in film

work. It got made, and because it got made at a major studio, with major stars, and had a big budget, he has sold another. And next year he gets to direct it.

Perhaps the means justify the end in a business where Art is anathema. Perhaps.

But the free ride is ended. Rock O'Bannon is a rare and original writer when he struggles against the rigors of the marketplace. He wrote "Wordplay." And if we choose

to give him a pass on *Alien Nation*, if we choose to let that one go through our memory like shit through a tin trumpet, let him understand this: the free ride is over.

The next time — and we're all going to be watching — he had damned well better do battle with the gods. And even if he doesn't win, we'd damned well better see some sweat.

This has been a public service announcement.



"Evolve . . . it's great!"

*Garry Kilworth's new story is about two people who discover the entrance to Ifurin, the Celtic Hell, a place of false hope and twisted dreams.*

# Ifurin and The Fat Man

**By Garry Kilworth**

**T**HE FAT MAN placed the gun carefully on the desk, where it shone with oily malevolence. He picked up the London newspaper. It was folded into a neat quarter of its original size, and the Fat Man had encircled an article with a thick black line. He read the words for the fifth time, the sweat from his brow dripping onto the already stained paper, smearing the October date and running down the rest of the print.

The content of the article told him that Professor Jane Andrews had discovered the location of an Anglo-Saxon barrow that she stated resembled an earlier description of the entrance to the Celtic Hell, Ifurin. "... a long mound with four entrances — one at each end and one on either side." The article also said that Professor Andrews was keeping the site a secret for the time being, as a security against grave robbers and treasure seekers. The reporter had interviewed her at her home in Fenroin, a village nestled amongst the Yorkshire dales.

The Fat Man stopped reading and fanned himself with the folded paper,

staring into the dressing-table mirror at which he was sitting. His body glistened in the late-afternoon light. He was naked, except for a pair of cotton underpants, which drooped below the whale-big belly, limp and wet. In the creases between the rolls of his flesh, there glinted more perspiration, and drops clung to his cheeks and jowls like tiny jewels sparkling in the dying sunlight.

He reached across to a chair nearby and grabbed at a towel, wiping himself all over with a certain lack of vigor. Within a few moments his skin had squeezed out more liquid to replace that which now soaked the towel. He sat on the stool like an oiled Buddha and contemplated his rotundity.

"Horses sweat; gentlemen perspire; ladies glow," he said to himself, repeating something his mother used to say when he was a boy.

His fatness filled the width of the mirror in front of him. He did not find the sight ugly or offensive. In fact he liked the shape: that was aesthetically pleasing to him, with its smooth curves and secret crevices. It was what went with the shape that bothered him, gave him hell. What went on *inside* it.

Suddenly his voice broke into a high-pitched, screamlike whine, which was only just on the right side of sanity.

"God, I can't *stand* it!"

He touched his skin. It was burning hot, as if he had a raging fever. Inside, he was like a furnace. He looked at the revolver, took it up, and wiped away some of the excess oil from the barrel. The weapon gleamed like its shiny owner.

The Fat Man looked at the window. The sun was just setting, and the normally dirty-white walls of the rented room had a roseate glow. The redness worried him. It reminded him too much of fire. Contained fire. He heaved himself to his feet and moved his bulk to the open window. Leaning on the sill, he tried to conjure a breeze from the still air outside, but no cooling agent came to him. There was a pungent smell to the atmosphere over the city that bothered him a little. In the room itself, three fans were humming away, but he decided that all they did was move the air from one corner to the next.

Finally he went to the refrigerator and took out a cellophane bag of ice cubes. He pushed them down the front of his underpants and rolled his eyes toward Heaven in a state of induced ecstasy.



\* \* \*

Shortly afterward the Fat Man dressed himself: a painful business. He hated things touching his skin. Then he placed the gun in his pocket and descended the stairs. Outside, his car was ready for the journey north, to the Yorkshire dales.

He squeezed in behind the wheel, his hands slippery, and lay back for a moment studying the murky sky. The light was almost gone now. Someone went past the car like a shadow. The Fat Man started the car and began to drive.

He reached the cottage about midnight and parked the car in the lane outside. It had not been difficult to find her address in the telephone book. Some time later he made his way to the front of the house and peered through a crack in the curtains. The light was on, but he could see no one within his range of vision. He heard the clatter of crockery. She was washing up or something.

He took the gun out of his pocket. It was causing a soreness on his hip where it was rubbing. He leaned against the wall of the cottage for a moment, to imbibe some of the coolness stored by the stone. Inside, he was like a loaf of freshly baked bread: concentrated heat and steam. Then he went back to the window.

Suddenly he caught sight of her as she drifted within view. She picked up some magazines and placed them tidily in a rack near the blazing fire. The Fat Man shifted his feet, uncomfortable at the sight of the red coals, and wiped his handkerchief over his face. The woman seemed to be alone at any rate.

He went to the front door and rapped hard. It opened a few moments later.

A woman stood there dressed in a tweed skirt and Aran jumper. He stepped backward for a moment, puzzled by the familiarity of her features, then swiftly collected his faculties together.

"Yes?" she said. The tone was brisk, matter-of-fact. He guessed she was in her late forties, early fifties, from the short hair graying just around the ears and above the brow. She had a pleasant face, if a little sharp. Her liquid brown eyes stared into his own.

"Professor Andrews?"

"Yes?"

He produced the pistol from behind his back.

"Mind if I come inside?"

She took a step backward with a shocked expression, then tried to slam the door, but his foot was already jamming it open.

"Don't do that," he said, sharply.

He stepped inside and closed it himself. There was a key in the lock, and he turned it. He surveyed the living room. Again he had that strange sense of *déjà vu*. It was furnished the way he had envisaged, with dark wood, a soft-looking sofa almost as fat as he was himself, and lots of books — books everywhere: piled on the piano, on the floor, and others where they should be, in bookcases lining the walls.

"Are you alone? Don't lie to me now. I'll use this if I have to." He put as much menace in his tone as possible, but a tremor of nervousness escaped, causing him to squeak the penultimate word. He cleared his throat.

"Voice is breaking. They'll be throwing me out of the choir next."

The attempt at humor seemed to infuriate her. Certainly she did not seem to be afraid.

"There's no one here. What do you want?"

Her hands gripped each other, but apart from that she was remarkably contained. "I've nothing of value. . . ."

He nodded at a few ornaments that looked like antiques.

"Oh, I don't know. There're one or two things that would fetch a few pounds — and probably a rare book or two tucked away amongst the others."

"You'd better take them, then, hadn't you? And go."

"Perhaps I haven't come for that sort of thing?"

He was sweating profusely in the hot room, in torment, and he smiled involuntarily. She stumbled backward, toward the fireplace, looking around frantically. He suddenly saw himself through her eyes: a nervous fat man in his fifties, perspiring, slightly breathless.

A potential rapist. It was an ugly picture. He winced in distaste at the thought.

"Look, I don't want to hurt you, and I certainly" — he scratched his buttock in embarrassment — "I haven't come here to *rape* you. I've done a lot of bad things — but never — you know." He drew himself up. "Haven't got that kind of character. Some women like fatties."

Once again she turned to the attack.

"You've broken into my home — forced your way in here. What else is one to think."

He was at a loss to answer. The heat in the room was making his head swim, and inside his heart was a boiler, building up a head of steam.

"Have I been here before?" he asked.

She looked at him strangely.

"Don't you know?"

"Can't remember — everything. Some blank spots. Bit hazy in places."

"It seems to me that someone *should* remember important events."

His head was hammering now, and there was a dry taste in his mouth. He sat down on a hard-backed chair. Soft furniture made him sweat more.

"Was there an event?"

"I — look, are you feeling all right? You look as though you've got a fever or something."

"I'm not well. Don't worry — it's not catching."

"Shall I make a cup of tea?" she said, then he saw her bite her lip. "What a stupid thing to say. It seemed — I don't know — natural for a moment." She paused, still standing by the fire. "What do you want?" Her voice had gone hard again.

"Do you have a towel or something? I'm dripping all over your nice — wheel-back, isn't it?" He stroked the dark wood of the chair, leaving a wet smear. "Made from the finest beech. Don't make 'em like this these days."

"This sort of thing doesn't suit you — perspiring like that. You must be. . ."

"No, no. It's my metabolism. Suddenly went haywire some time ago. I generate too much internal heat. Nothing can be done about it, I'm afraid. Could you? The towel?"

He let her leave the room, but he told her to hum.

"Would you mind? So that I know where you are."

She looked dubious, but did as she was told — some tuneless thing that might have been the march "Blaze Away." He wondered if she was taunting him, then dismissed the thought. She returned with the towel and handed it to him.

"Thanks." He wiped himself. Then the revolver.

He stared at her now as she took a seat on the sofa.

"There's a joke," he said, "about a man who marries a woman whose dog keeps bothering him. Each time it does so, the man says, 'That's one,' and 'That's two.' After the third time, he tells the dog, 'That's three,' and shoots

it in the head. When his horrified bride protests, he tells her, "That's one. . . ."

"Why are you telling me this? I'm not interested in your jokes, if that's what you call them."

The Fat Man leaned forward in his chair and pointed the pistol at her.

"Now, listen to me carefully, Jane," he said, using her forename to intimidate her. "I want you to tell me the location of the barrow you found."

Her voice was faint with incredulity.

"The barrow?"

"I read the article in the paper. Tell me."

"But why?"

"I shan't ask again."

Her mouth formed a thin line.

"I can't — won't."

He aimed the gun at her heart and pulled the trigger. There was a loud *clack* as the hammer hit an empty chamber. She jumped. Her face was very white. She seemed on the verge of tears.

"That's one, Jane."

A log shifted in the grate, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney. Neither of them turned to look. The tension kept their eyes locked to each other's, and he could see a muscle twitching at the bridge of her nose, where a pinched, vertical frown had appeared.

"You rotten bastard."

He was genuinely shocked at this expression, coming from the lips of a genteel, demure lady.

"Hey, hey. There's no need for that kind of language."

"Of course there is, you stupid man. There's every need. You come in here, into *my* house, point a gun at me and pull the trigger, and I'm supposed to not swear at you? Good God, man, you live in a fantasy world. You're sick. . . ."

A wave of self-pity mingled with the fire inside him. He wanted to throttle her, feel that white throat beneath his thumbs, pulsing, until, until. . . .

"I'm sick, all right, but not the way you mean. I've got this heat — fierce. You don't know. It's agony. It never stops. Sometimes I think I'm going to explode. I'd give *anything*. I'd kill."

Tears began burning hot trails down his bulbous cheeks. More coals shifted in the grate and belched hot fumes and dust into the atmosphere. The woman's face was high with color: crimson. He hated the way her face went like that. Blotched. She had always been the same. It used to drive him crazy.

"You're not leaving me," he shouted. "I won't let you go. . . ."

"Pardon?" She sat back and smiled.

He shook his head. Something was not quite right. Where was he? Yes, the mound. He had almost forgotten — drifted for a moment. The barrow. He needed the location of the barrow.

"I have to have it," he said. "The location."

"If it's treasure you're after, you may be disappointed."

"We'll see. Is it open? Have you opened it yet?"

She seemed to hesitate, then replied, "I've uncovered the entrances. Yes."

The Fat Man opened his shirt to reveal undulating flesh.

"Scuse me. Not a pretty sight, but I need the air."

"I don't find it repulsive, if that's what you mean."

"Good." He pointed the gun at her again.

"Now . . .," he said.

She shook her head.

Again the hammer clacked on an empty chamber.

"Two. Look, I don't want to have to kill you. I assure you there's a bullet in the next chamber. I think you're a brave lady, but I need that location, don't you see? I have to have it."

This time she had not started at the sound of the gun, and her face showed no signs of anxiety. It was as if she did not care any longer. He began to feel the sharp hooks of desperation, tearing at his brain.

"Please," he said. "I understand that you want to keep this place a secret from the public, until you've thoroughly excavated it, but I promise I won't tell a soul. Not a soul. I won't take anything away, either. Honestly. Devil take me if I do. I need to see it, learn something about it. That's all. Won't you help me? They knew things in those days that have been forgotten — ways of dealing with situations such as mine."

"A secret cure? You don't believe in sorcery, surely?"

"Black magic? I don't know about that. But they had their ways — the old ways. We've changed things — for the worse."

She stared into his eyes, her own like slits. She seemed to be making a decision, and hope welled up inside him.

"Do you promise not to disturb what's inside? We have found something — the grave of a warrior. How do I know you won't disturb the bones?"

"I have great respect for the dead."

"That's as it should be. What do you hope to learn?"

"I know what I'm doing."

He waited for her answer, but she said, rather startlingly, "Have you always been fat?"

He was taken aback by the question.

"No. Yes. I can't remember. It's not the weight, though. It's the heat — inside. I've been told it might be psychosomatic. A guilt thing. I committed some sort of — this damned amnesia — I don't know what. Something bad."

"I used to be fat, too. But it was the shape I didn't like. They made fun of me at school. Children can be quite cruel."

"I understand."

"My husband, too, when he was alive. He called me names when he was angry with me. Husbands can be cruel, too."

The Fat Man was incensed with this unknown man. He wiped his face furiously.

"I'd have smashed his face in."

"Would you?" she arched an eyebrow, which irritated him.

"Yes, yes, I would."

"I don't think so. I think you're a coward. A bully and a coward."

He knew this was true, and it was important to him. It was essential that the coward in him was recognized, by him and others.

Nevertheless, he protested.

"I could kill you for that."

She smiled grimly. "Yes, I know."

"I'm burning up," he said wearily. "Look, I don't want to argue anymore. I want the barrow. Please."

"Come with me," she said, rising. "It's not too far away. An hour's walk. Perhaps a little more."

She went to the door, and he followed, out into the dark, soft night beyond.

\* \* \*

THE GOING was spongy — mossy peat — and she had to help him along occasionally. The Fat Man stumbled over the soft ground, fighting for breath and hating the exertion. Exercise was like bellows to the furnace inside him. Had he always disliked walking? It seemed to him that he had, but that might have been false. Certainly he recalled such walks, though not vividly — no time or place — simply the recollection of wandering over such ground and observing, probably with distaste, the countryside around.

She made little allowance for his slowness, taking the opportunity to get ahead, then rest, while he caught up to her, but not permitting him the luxury of stopping for a while. The gun gleamed metal-blue in the moonlight, and whenever she got too far ahead, he would shout, waving the weapon in her direction but knowing that if she were to run, he could never hit her. It was as well she did not know that, too.

There were many gullies in the crazed peat, which needed circumnavigating, and he cursed them along with the rest of the scene. It was only the thought of the barrow that kept him going. It would not be long now.

Finally, three hours later, they reached a small valley with a stream running below some tall natural rocks. She led the way to a small spinney overlooking the valley and into its heart. There he beheld the barrow.

*"Stretched like a sow that has brought forth her farrow,"* he quoted, leaning against a tree to catch his breath. "Andrew Young. Do you know the poem?"

"Yes."

"The Fat Man knows it, too," he said in a satisfied tone. "How did you find this place?" He stared at the grassy mound, noting the entrance holes.

"From old manuscripts."

"Written in blood?" he joked, but she did not respond.

He stared at the mound again. It was to be his escape. A bolt-hole.

"You really think I'm a coward?" he asked her, almost afraid that her answer would be no.

"Yes, I do."

"That's good. That's good. My name is Douglas — my surname, that is. I'm a Celt, you know. Do you realize that the worst sin a Celt can commit is an act of cowardice?"

"There are worse things. Murder for instance."

"No. Not for a Celt."

He felt himself boiling inside. His heart felt about to burst, like a molten ball, overheating. The core of the earth was in his chest — bubbling lava, smoking rock, fiery-hot metal running through his veins. He burned. He burned. He was a volcano, with no vent, no outlet. He had to contain it all within — the terrible heat.

"Not for a Celt. They did things differently. I'm not a Christian, you know. I stopped all that. When I realized that when I die I shall go to Hell. You see, the way I understand it, Christians here, in Britain, they've got the wrong Hell. It's been inherited from the Middle East."

"What?" She seemed amused, but it was anything but humorous to him.

"No, listen. I'm serious. You see, Heaven and Hell are — well, Heaven's the opposite of what you get on earth, and Hell is the extreme of what you get down here. Or should be. Take the Moslems — they get a Heaven with fountains and streams and green grass — just what the Arabs *don't* get down here. And their Hell is fire and brimstone. The Christian Hell — well, we got it from the Jews, who lived in the Middle East. Hot gases, sulfur, scalding pools. *Fire*. Hell for them was the climate of their own region, only a thousand times worse — and for eternity — see what I mean?"

"I'm beginning to."

"See, our Hell, in Britain, should go by the climate — wet, gray, dismal and frequently *cold* — like our weather. Instead. . . ."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying," cried the Fat Man, getting angry, "that our Hell should be the same as our weather, only a thousand times worse. That's what I'm saying. What I'm saying is that Christians here have got the wrong Hell. It's one they've inherited from a hot country. That's why I changed to being a Celt — worshipping their gods. Those Christians have got the wrong fucking Hell, excuse me." He finished, breathing heavily through his nose.

"I still don't see. . . ."

"But the Celtic Hell, that's different. Now, they knew what was what."

"Ifurin?"

"That's the place. The Hell that cowards like me were sent to after death. A place of strange monsters, weird creatures — but, above all,



a freezing place. A Hell of ice and snow and bitterly cold winds — just the sort of winters that killed off the weaker Celts. Winters they hated. Now, you see, if I go to a Christian Hell, I'm doomed to spend eternity in a place of heat. But I don't intend to do so. You go to the place you believe in, right? That's what it's all about — belief. I'm a Celt. A *damned* Celt. Isn't that fortunate? I have all the requirements — I'm a cowardly Celt."

He turned and stared at the barrow.

"And here we are at the gates of Ifurin — a Hell of ice."

He turned to her again and thought that he might be frightening her with his talk, so he took her hand. She had served his purpose, and he was grateful to her. In a way he quite liked her. She had spirit. He admired her for that. Perhaps under different circumstances . . . ? He shook the thought free from his mind.

"You know what I'm saying, don't you? It's all right. Please don't worry about me. I know what I'm doing."

Her hand slipped out of his.

"I think I do. That's what the gun is for."

"Yes."

"Would you have used it on me?"

He sighed. "I don't know."

She nodded, smiling. "I think you would. I *know* you would. I'll wait for you here."

"You don't understand. I'm not. . . ."

"I understand."

He shrugged and turned from her. He took a flashlight out of his pocket and squeezed himself through one of the entrances to the barrow.

Inside, it was musty and smelled of old rags and damp clay. He switched on the flashlight to reveal a womblike cavity large enough for about five people. In the middle was a spread of sticklike bones.

"If we hadn't imported Christianity," he called to her, "we'd still believe in the Celtic Hell today."

Her answer was very clear.

"Do you want to know what I think Hell is? I think it's a place where games are played. I think it's a place where you can trust no one — least of all yourself. It's a place where knowledge is faulty and memories are malleable. It's a place of false hope and twisted dreams. Yesterday you loved me, today you met me, tomorrow you'll hate me. And the day after

tomorrow, you'll forget and forget and forget, recurring."

Her words made his head spin.

"You won't talk me out of it."

There was silence after that.

He rolled next to the bones, laying his arms across them. Light began to creep into the barrow, joining him. The Fat Man was not impressed. In his mind's eye were visions of gigantic cliffs of ice; huge, swirling masses of ice; towers, caves, palaces, bridges, spires, all of ice. White whirlwind ice. He saw glistening stretches of snow reaching out with hard crystals into infinity, into eternity. Snow like crushed diamonds. Even the very atmosphere was translucent with fog-frost, ready to freeze the lungs into which it was drawn. He saw himself bellowing in delight, into the frozen mists, across the whirling wastes, and even his shout took time to thaw, and the blood ran crystal-cold in his veins, and sharp, scything blizzards numbed his lips, his eyes, his soul. . . .

"That's *three*," he said quietly, and put the muzzle of the pistol inside his mouth, pointing upward, toward his brain. He pulled the trigger. The bullet tore through the roof of his mouth and out the back of his head. Incredible pain followed.

The pain continued. A red mist was before his eyes. He placed the gun to his heart and fired a second shot. It ripped him open. More pain.

It was not working.

Four more shots, three into his brain, one more into his heart. Death did not come. Only pain.

He sat up. The light inside the barrow was intensifying into a dark red glow. The stifling heat of the enclosed tomb overpowered him. He crawled to one of the exits and out again, to where she was waiting. He thought at first she was smiling, but it was only her face, changing.

The other landscape burned with rockfire, and he remembered then where he was — nor had he ever been out of it.

"Wrong place," he shouted miserably. "Was I in the wrong place all the time?"

The figure laughed and said, "Where you were is where you are."

"All the time," he cried.

And the other smiled, walking forward with an outstretched hand.

"Not again," whimpered the Fat Man. "Please not again."

"Again," it echoed.

*According to legend, the Scandinavian mermen were regarded as beneficent creatures. In this story, one Lieutenant Huidkamp encounters what he thought to be legend and finds those legends to be true.*

# The Sea Man

**By Jane Yolen**

**T**HE SKY OVER the sea is a deep blue slate. "And neither bird nor cloud dares write upon it, my darling daughter Jannie," the lieutenant sets down in his careful script. "But there are always wonders below the water. Things we know and things we do not know. Yet all are in God's plan. Here are some of them."

He draws tiny dolphins and flying fish in the margins of his letter. They leap from line to line like a strange punctuation. "I send you a kiss, safe and snug in Zeeland. Your loving father, Maarten Huiskamp, April 1663."

The lieutenant looks up and out across the water to the shore. There the mills spin the heavy wind in their long arms. Cattle graze the dike grasses. Along the roadside, thousands of colored tulips bow and bend with every passing breeze.

Lieutenant Huiskamp smiles, stands, and stretches. He has been working on the letter to Jannie for a long while. He knows she will love the

decorations on the pages even though she does not yet know how to read. He sits down again and makes a whale at the bottom spouting her name, and a portrait of Jannie herself, with a fishtail instead of legs, swimming in the water. Her long blonde braids piled on top of her head look like a crown.

Though he has never seen a mermaid — a “zee wyve,” as his men say — and does not even think they are real, his little Jannie will enjoy the picture on the letter. It may be the last one he can send her for a long, long time. Soon his ship, *The Water Nix*, which now bobs at anchor off the coast, will join the rest of the fleet out on the open sea.

“Look . . . look!” the sailors swabbing the deck near him cry out.

Lieutenant Huiskamp places the pen carefully by the paper, stands again, and shades his eyes.

“What is it?” he calls.

The men are boiling around the railing, jostling one another and pointing to the open sea. “Look!” they call again.

Huiskamp joins them at the rail. There is an odd whirling in the water, as if it is pleated like a piece of cloth. He sees a hand rise out of the water, then an arm, two arms, then a man’s head. It looks as if the man is praying, or as if he is shouting for help, but he makes no sound.

“He is drowning, poor soul,” cries the lieutenant. “Lower the boats.”

Three sailors set out in a small rescue boat over the troubled water. The strange pleated waves rock their little craft, but never come as far as to trouble *The Water Nix*. It is as if a caldron is bubbling right below the unfortunate man.

The sailors pull steadily on the oars. When they get to the man, they see that his shoulders are caught in fish netting. Though he struggles frantically, he is not able to get free.

Reaching over, the sailors haul him aboard, pulling him up by the arms.

When he is halfway in the boat, the lieutenant can see he is not entirely a man. From the waist up, he is as human as the sailors, with broad, muscular shoulders and dark curly hair glinting with green, like phosphorescence.

“Like a Portugee,” thinks Huiskamp.

But below the waist he is a fish, with a tail like a tunny’s, the scales silver and blue.

Frightened, the men try to push him back, but Lieutenant Huiskamp calls to them through the speaking trumpet. "Bring him on board. The captain will want to have a look."

The men are reluctant to do so, but they have had their orders. Good sailors, they do not disobey. They wrap the sea man more carefully in the netting and throw him into the bottom of their boat. Then they row back to *The Water Nix*, where their mates draw the sea man up onto the deck.

Seen up close, the sea man has webbing as gray as storm air between his fingers. His mouth is round like a fish's, his eyes a pale, watery blue. There are gray-green hairs curling on his chest in the pattern of seashells. He has gill slits along his neck.

The sea man lies upon the deck, tangled in the netting. He does not speak.

"What an ugly thing," says one of the sailors, a man named Jan.

"We could sell him," says Henk, smoothing his fair mustache.

"Sell him?" Pieter, the cabin boy, asks.

Henk smiles. "The professors at the university at Leiden would give a lot of guilders to study such a thing.

The sea man wriggles along the deck, but still he makes no sound except for the *slip-slap* of his tail as it moves along the flooring. His fish mouth opens and closes, but he does not speak.

Henk leans over. "Phew, he smells."

Pieter adds, "Like a fish."

Lieutenant Huiskamp shakes his head. "And what would you have him smell like? After all, he lives in the water."

"Is he deaf, sir?" asks Pieter. "I have an uncle in Haarlem who is deaf, and he does not talk either." He turns and shouts the question into the sea man's ear. "Are you deaf?"

At the shout, the sea man puts his webbed fingers over his ears and makes an odd sound, high and keening, more like a whistle than a word.

"Not deaf, then," says Pieter, backing away.

The other sailors back away as well. But the lieutenant kneels down beside the sea man and speaks to him slowly. He tries Dutch and Danish, German, English, Spanish, and French.

The sea man opens his mouth again, and out comes that same high whistling. His mouth is dark and hollow. Like a fish, he has no tongue.

"Who are you?" Lieutenant Huiskamp asks, more slowly still. He

points and makes a question mark over the sea man's head.

At that, the sea man sits up, watching the lieutenant's fingers steadily with his watery eyes. The netting is draped around his shoulders like a shawl. He tries to move his own hands, but they are bound fast to his sides by the net.

"Careful, sir," the cabin boy calls out. "He looks fierce."

The sailors move forward anxiously.

"Give me a knife," the lieutenant calls.

Henk hands him a long, sharp knife with a carved wood handle. "Stick him for me," he says. "Fillet him."

The lieutenant takes the knife and quickly slices through the netting, freeing the sea man's hands.

The sea man flexes and unflexes his fingers. Then he makes strange, rapid signs with them, and the webbings in between pulse green and pink and gray. It is a language none of them understands, even when he slows down, even when he repeats a phrase. He reaches out and takes Lieutenant Huiskamp's hand, the one without the knife, and his hand is slippery, wet, and cold.

"Look out, sir!" cries Henk. He grabs for the knife.

"Stop, man!" Lieutenant Huiskamp says. "Captain vanTassel will be back soon. Let him see this creature alive. Put him in the hold." He takes the knife from Henk and stands.

"Remember the money from the professors," says Pieter.

"Good boy," the lieutenant says. He pats Pieter on the head.

Henk grumbles, "The professors will want him either alive or dead. And he's safer dead."

"But alive they will pay more," says Pieter.

"The professors will not have him," says Huiskamp sternly. "He belongs to the Dutch navy. Even as you. Even as I." But he says it softly. "Put him in the hold."

Henk grumbles some more, but he bends over the sea man and lifts him by the shoulders. Jan and Pieter and another man take the great tail. They give one big heave and lift the sea man from the deck.

With another high whistle, the sea man begins to thrash and twist. The tip of his tail catches the edge of the table, flipping it over. The pen and ink bottle go flying. The letter to little Jannie flutters into the air, then floats down onto the deck, settling between the man and the lieutenant.

Huiskamp bends over to retrieve his letter, but the sea man touches it first. His strange webbed hand points to the picture where little Jannie swims beside the whale. His finger leaves a wet smudge around her, like a wave. Then he opens his mouth, and a long, sad note, wholly unlike the whistle, bellows forth.

For a moment, none of them move. The sound is as loud and lowing as a foghorn, and as lonely.

Suddenly there is an answering cry from the sea. The water below the ship grows pleated again. *The Water Nix* rocks frantically at anchor.

"Look!" Pieter calls, staring over the rail.

Below them in the water is another figure, with long, dark curling hair.

"It is a sea wife," Lieutenant Huiskamp whispers.

"Should we bring her up, too?" asks Henk. "One for the Dutch navy and one for the professors on shore."

The sea wife reaches below the waves and brings up something to her breast, something small with dark braids and a light green tail.

"A child," Pieter says.

"A little girl," Jan adds.

At the sound of their voices, the child turns in her mother's arms and waves her webbed hands at them. She laughs silently. Her little tail strokes the water.

Lieutenant Huiskamp stares at the sea girl for a long moment, as silent as she. When he turns back again, his face is wet with ocean spray. Without a word, he walks over to the sea man and cuts the rest of the netting around him. He folds the net slowly and deliberately into a small packet, which he sets down by the overturned table. Then he places his arms under the sea man's shoulders.

Jan and Pieter take up the tail.

When they throw the sea man over the railing, he arches his back and flips over three times before knifing into the water in a perfect dive. Then he surfaces, salutes the ship, and dives back into the deep. His wife and child follow him.

"Well, that is one curiosity we will not see again," says Henk. "Nor the money."

Lieutenant Huiskamp smiles quietly. "Look at this deck," he says. "It is a great mess. And Captain vanTassel is due back from shore at any minute. Get to work, men." He turns the table upright and places the

letter, pen, and ink on it. And the net packet.

But Henk is wrong about the sea man. For three nights running, on Lieutenant Huiskamp's watch, the sea man surfaces, surrounded by the pleated water. His hands move quick and slow, quick and slow. And the lieutenant, who learns languages easily, learns to read those fingers. They warn of bad weather and wild waves; they warn of lightning, thunder, and fire.

Lieutenant Huiskamp adds a note to Jannie at the bottom of the page. "It was only the sea man's warnings that kept our ship safe at its mooring, in view of the waving tulips and the windmills with the storms in their long arms. Only our ship was safe while others in the fleet were lost at sea. God's plan indeed, my child."

He decorates the envelope with a picture of the sea man and the sea wife and their child, who, except for her dark hair and the gray webbings between her fingers, except for the phosphorescent tail, looks remarkably like little Jannie Huiskamp, so safe upon the shore in a snug little home in Zeeland.

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## Coming Soon

April's feature story is a novelet, "Cast On A Distant Shore" by R. Garcia y Robertson. This is Robertson's first F&SF story, and it is a dazzling debut, an actionful, exotic SF tale from a welcome new talent.

Soon: New stories from Alan Dean Foster, Wayne Wightman, Michael P. Kube-McDowell, Ramsey Campbell, Judith Moffett and many others.

The April issue is on sale March 2.





# SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

## THE SECRET OF THE UNIVERSE

**P**ARADOXES, IN the sense of self-contradictory statements, have always irritated me. It's my firm belief that the Universe works in such a way that self-contradictions do not occur. If, then, it seems we have a paradox, it can only be because we have perversely insisted on saying something we should not say.

Here, for instance, is an example of a paradox. Suppose that a certain town contains only one barber and that he shaves every man in the town except those who shave themselves. The question is: Who shaves the barber?

The barber cannot shave himself because he shaves only those who do not shave themselves. On the other hand, if he doesn't shave himself, he is bound, by the terms of the statement, to shave himself.

The paradox only arises, however, if we insist on making statements that already possess the

seeds of self-contradiction. The proper way of making a *sensible* statement about the situation is to say: "The barber shaves himself and, in addition, every other man in the town except those who shave themselves." Then there is no paradox.

Here's another one: A certain despotic monarch has decreed that anyone crossing a certain bridge must declare his destination and his purpose for going there. If he lies, he must be hanged. If he tells the truth, he must be left in peace.

A certain man, crossing the bridge, is asked his destination and answers, "I am going to the gallows for the purpose of being hanged."

Well, then, if he is now hanged, he was telling the truth and should have been left in peace. But if he is left in peace, he told a lie and should have been hanged. Back and forth. Back and forth.

Again, that answer must be anticipated and must be ruled out of bounds or the decree is senseless.

[In real life, I imagine the despotic monarch would say, "Hang him for being a wise guy," or "He hasn't told the truth till after he was hanged, whereupon you can allow his corpse to go in peace."]

In mathematics, there *is* the tendency to forbid the sources of paradox. For instance, if division by zero were allowed, it could be easily proved that all numbers of any kind were equal. So, to prevent that, mathematicians arbitrarily forbid division by zero, and that's all there is to that.

More subtle paradoxes in mathematics have their uses, since they stimulate thought and encourage the increase of mathematical rigor. Back in 450 B.C., for instance, a Greek philosopher, Zeno of Elea, advanced four paradoxes, all of which tended to show that motion, as it was sensed, was impossible.

The best known of these paradoxes is usually known as "Achilles and the Tortoise," and this is the way it goes:

Suppose that Achilles (the fleetest of the Greek heroes involved in the siege of Troy) could run ten times as fast as a tortoise, and suppose the two take part in a race, with the tortoise given a ten yard headstart.

In that case, it can be argued that Achilles cannot possibly over-

take the tortoise, for by the time Achilles has covered the ten yards between himself and the tortoise's original position, the tortoise has advanced one yard. When Achilles covers the additional yard, the tortoise has advanced another tenth of a yard, and by the time Achilles runs that distance the tortoise has advanced a hundredth of a yard, and so on forever. Achilles comes ever closer, but he can't ever quite catch up.

The reasoning is impeccable, but we all know that, in actual truth, Achilles would quickly pass the tortoise. In fact, if two people, A and B, are having a race, and if A can run faster than B by even the smallest measure, A will eventually overtake and pass B, even if B has a very large (but finite) headstart, provided both parties travel at a constant best speed for an indefinitely prolonged period.

There's the paradox, then. Logical reasoning shows that Achilles cannot overtake the tortoise, and simple observation shows that he can and does.

This stumped mathematicians for two thousand years, partly because it seemed to be taken for granted that if you have an infinite series of numbers, such as  $10 + 1 + 1/10 + 1/100 \dots$ , then the sum must be infinite and the time it takes to cross a distance represented by such

numbers must also be infinite.

Eventually, though, mathematicians realized that this apparently obvious assumption — that an infinite set of numbers, however small, must have an infinite sum — was simply wrong. The Scottish mathematician James Gregory (1638-1675) is usually given credit for making this clear about 1670.

In hindsight, this is surprisingly easy to show. Consider the series  $10 + 1 + 1/10 + 1/100 \dots$ . Add 10 and 1 and you have 11; add  $1/10$  to that and you have 11.1; add  $1/100$  to that and you have 11.11; add  $1/1000$  to that and you have 11.111. If you add an infinite number of such terms you end up with 11.111111 ... But such an infinite decimal number is only  $11 \frac{1}{9}$  in fractions.

Consequently, the entire infinite set of ever decreasing numbers that represents the lead of the tortoise over Achilles has a total sum of  $11 \frac{1}{9}$  yards and Achilles overtakes the tortoise in the time it takes him to run  $11 \frac{1}{9}$  yards.

An infinite series with a finite sum is a "converging series," and the simplest example, by my judgement, is  $1 + 1/2 + 1/4 + 1/8 \dots$  where each term is half the one before. If you start adding together the terms of such a series you will have no trouble convincing yourself that the sum of the entire infinite set is, simply, 2.

An infinite series with an infinite sum is a "diverging series." Thus, the series  $1 + 2 + 4 + 8 \dots$  clearly grows larger and larger without limit, so that the sum can be said to be infinite.

It isn't always easy to tell if a series is divergent or convergent. For instance, the series  $1 + 1/2 + 1/3 + 1/4 + 1/5 \dots$  is divergent. If you add the terms, the sum grows continually larger. To be sure, the growth in the value of the sum becomes slower and slower, but if you take enough terms you can get a sum that is higher than 2, or 3, or 4, or any higher number you care to name.

I believe that this series is the most gently divergent it is possible to have.

I learned about convergent series, if I recall correctly, in my high school course in intermediate algebra, when I was fourteen, and it really struck me in a heap.

Unfortunately, I am not a natural mathematician. There were those who, even in their teen-aged years, could grasp truly subtle mathematical relationships — men like Galois, Clairaut, Pascal, Gauss, and so on — but I was not one of them by several light years.

I struggled with converging series and managed to see something in a vague, unsystematic way,

and now, over half a century later, with a great deal more experience, I can present those teenage thoughts in a much more sensible way.

Let's consider the series  $1 + 1/2 + 1/4 + 1/8 + 1/16 \dots$  and try to find a way of representing it by something we can easily visualize. Imagine a series of squares, for instance, the first one being 1 centimeter on each side, the second  $1/2$  centimeter, the third  $1/4$  centimeter, the fourth  $1/8$  centimeter, and so on.

Imagine them all shoved tightly together so that you have the largest square on the left, the second largest adjoining it on the right, then the third largest, the fourth and so on. You have a line of an infinite number of smaller and smaller squares, side by side.

All of them taken together, *all* of them, would stretch across a total length of 2 centimeters. The first one would take up half the total length, the next one would take up half of what's left, the next half of what now remains, and so on *forever*.

Naturally, the squares become extremely tiny very rapidly. The 27th square is roughly the size of an atom, and once it is placed, all that is left of the 2-centimeter total is about the width of another atom. Into the second atom's-width, however, an infinite number of further

squares still rapidly decreasing in size is squeezed.

The 27th square is roughly  $1/100,000,000$ th of a centimeter on each side, so let's imagine that it and all the squares that follow are magnified a hundred million times. The 27th square would appear to be one centimeter on each side, followed by another square that was  $1/2$  centimeter on each side, followed by one that was  $1/4$  centimeter, and so on.

In short, the magnification would produce a series just equal, both in size and in number of squares, to the one we began with.

What's more, the 51st square is so small that it is only about the width of a proton. Nevertheless, if it were expanded to a 1-centimeter square, it would have a tail of still smaller squares equal both in size and in number to what we had at the beginning.

We could keep this up *forever*, and never run out. No matter how far we went, millions of ever decreasing squares, trillions, duodecillions, we would have left a tail precisely similar to the original. Such a situation is said to show "self-similarity."

And all of it, *all* of it, fits into a two centimeter width. Nor is there anything magic about the two centimeter width. It can all be made to fit into a one centimeter width, or a

1/10 centimeter width — or the width of a proton, for that matter.

It's no use trying to "understand" this in the same sense that we understand that there are 36 inches in a yard. We have no direct experience with infinite quantities and we can't have. We can only try to imagine the consequences of the existence of infinite quantities, and the consequences are so utterly different from anything we *can* experience that they "make no sense."

For instance, the number of points in a line is a higher infinity than that of the infinite number of integers. There is no conceivable way in which you can match those points with numbers. If you were to try to arrange the points in such a way as to line them up with numbers, you would invariably find that some points had no numbers attached to them. In fact, an infinite number of points would have no numbers attached to them.

On the other hand, you can match the points in a line one centimeter long with the points in another line two centimeters long, so that you must conclude that the shorter line has as many points as the longer one. In fact, a line one centimeter long has as many points as can be squeezed into the entire three dimensional Universe. You want that explained? Not by me,

and not by anyone. It can be proven, but it can't be made to "make sense" in the ordinary way.

Let's get back to self-similarity. We can find that not only in a series of numbers, but in geometrical shapes. In 1906, for instance, a Swedish mathematician, Helge von Koch (1870-1924), invented a kind of super snowflake. This is how he got it.

You start with an equilateral triangle (all sides equal), divide each side into thirds and construct a new smaller equilateral triangle on the middle third of each of the sides. This gives you a six-pointed star. You then divide each of the sides of the six equilateral triangles of the star into thirds and build a new, still smaller equilateral triangle on each middle third. You now have a figure rimmed by eighteen equilateral triangles. You divide each of the sides of these 18 triangles into thirds — and so on and so on, *forever*.

Naturally, no matter how large your original triangle and how meticulous your draftmanship, the new triangles quickly become too small to draw. You have to draw them in imagination and try to work out the consequences.

If, for instance, you built up the super snowflake forever, the length of the perimeter bounding the snow-

flake at each stage forms a diverging series. In the end, therefore, the perimeter of the snowflake is of infinite length.

On the other hand, the area of the snowflake at each stage forms a converging series with a finite sum. That means even at the end, with an infinite perimeter, the snowflake has an area of no more than 1.6 times the original equilateral triangle.

Suppose now that you study one of the relatively large triangles on one of the sides of the original triangle. It is infinitely complex as smaller and smaller and smaller triangles sprout off it, without end. If you take one of those smaller triangles, however, one so small that it can be seen only under a microscope, and imagine it expanded for easy viewing, it is just as complex as the larger triangle had been. If you consider a still smaller and an even smaller one, indefinitely, the complexity does not decrease. The super snowflake shows self-similarity.

Here is another example. Imagine a tree, with a trunk that is divided into three branches. Each of those branches divides into three smaller branches and each of those smaller branches divides into three still smaller branches. You can easily imagine a real tree having a branching arrangement like that.

However, to have a mathematical super tree, you must imagine that all the branches divided into three smaller branches, and each of these into three still smaller branches, and each of these into yet smaller branches, forever. Such a super tree also shows self-similarity and each branch, however small, is just as complex as the entire tree.

Such curves and geometrical figures were called "pathological" at first because they didn't follow the simple rule that governed the polygons, circles, spheres, and cylinders of ordinary geometry.

In 1977, however, a French-American mathematician, Benoit Mandelbrot, began to study such pathological curves systematically and showed that they didn't fit even the most fundamental properties of geometric figures.

We are all taught, as soon as we are exposed to geometry, that a point is zero dimensional, a line is one dimensional, a plane is two dimensional, and a solid is three dimensional. Eventually, we find that if we consider a solid that possesses duration and exists in time, it is four dimensional. We may even learn that geometers can handle still higher dimensions as a matter of course.

All these dimensions, however, are whole numbers — 0, 1, 2, 3, and so on. How can we have anything else?

Mandelbrot, however, showed that the boundary of the super snowflake was so fuzzy and made such sharp turns at every point that there was no use considering it to be a line in the ordinary sense. It was something that was not quite a line and yet not quite a plane, either. It had a dimension that was *in between* one and two. In fact, he showed that it made sense to consider its dimension to be equal to the logarithm of four divided by the logarithm of three. This comes to about 1.26186. Thus, the boundary of the super snowflake has a dimension of just over  $1\frac{1}{4}$ .

Other such figures also had fractional dimensions, and because of this, they came to be called "fractals."

It turned out that fractals were not pathological examples of geometric shapes that were dreamed up through the fevered imaginations of mathematicians. Rather, they were closer to the real objects of the world than were the smooth, simple curves and planes of idealized geometry. It was these latter that were the products of imagination.

In consequence, Mandelbrot's work became more and more important.

Now let's change the subject slightly. Several years ago, I had occasion to hang about Rockefeller

University now and then, and I met Heinz Pagels there. He was a tall fellow with white hair and a smooth, unlined face. He was exceedingly pleasant and bright.

He was a physicist and knew much more about physics than I did. This was no surprise. Everyone knows more than I do about something or other. It also seemed to me that he was more intelligent than I was.

You might think, if you share the general opinion that I have a giant ego, that I would hate people who seemed more intelligent than I do, but I don't. I have discovered that people more intelligent than I am (and Heinz was the third of the sort I had met) are extremely kindly and pleasant, and besides I have found that if I listen carefully to them, I am stimulated sufficiently to work up useful ideas; and ideas, after all, are my stock in trade.

I remember that in our first conversation, Heinz talked about the "inflationary Universe," a new idea to the effect that the Universe, in the first instant after its formation, expanded at enormous speed, thus explaining some points that bothered astronomers who had assumed the initial moments of the big bang to be non inflationary.

What particularly interested me was that Heinz told me that according to this theory, the Universe

started as a quantum fluctuation of the vacuum, and was thus created out of nothing.

This got me excited, because in the September 1966 issue of *F & SF*, years before the inflationary universe had been thought up, I had published an essay called "*I'm Looking Over a Four-Leaf Clover*" in which I suggested that the Universe was created out of nothing at the time of the big bang. In fact, a key statement in the essay was my definition of what I called "Asimov's Cosmogonic Principle"; i.e. "In the Beginning, there was Nothing."

This does not mean I anticipated the inflationary Universe. I just get these intuitional thrusts, but I lack the ability to carry through. Thus, at fourteen, I had the vague intuitional notion of self-similarity in connection with converging series, but neither then, nor at any time thereafter, could I possibly have duplicated what Mandelbrot did. And though I grasped the concept of creation out of nothing, I couldn't in a million years have worked out the detailed theory of an inflationary Universe. (However, I'm not a total failure. I early realized that my intuitional grasp made it possible for me to write science fiction.)

I met Heinz periodically thereafter, all the more so after he became the Director of the New York Academy of Sciences.

One time, a bunch of us, including Heinz and myself, were sitting discussing this and that, and Heinz raised an interesting question.

He said, "Is it possible, do you suppose, that someday, all the questions of science will be answered and there will be nothing left to do? Or is it impossible to get all the answers? And is there any way we can conceivably decide, right now, which of these two situations is correct?"

I was the first to speak. I said, "I believe we can decide right now, Heinz, and easily."

Heinz turned to me and said, "How, Isaac?"

And I said, "It's my belief that the Universe possesses, in its essence, fractal properties of a very complex sort and that the pursuit of science shares these properties. It follows that any part of the Universe that remains un-understood, and any part of scientific investigation that remains unresolved, however small that might be in comparison to what is understood and resolved, contains within it all the complexity of the original. Therefore, we'll never finish. No matter how far we go, the road ahead will be as long as it was at the start, and that's the secret to the Universe."

I reported all this to my dear wife, Janet, who looked at me



thoughtfully and said, "You'd better write up that idea."

"Why?" I said. "It's just an idea."

She said, "Heinz might use it."

"I hope he does," I said. "I don't know enough physics to do anything with it, and he does."

"But he might forget he heard it from you."

"So what? Ideas are cheap. It's only what you do with them that counts."

Then came July 22, 1988, when Janet and I headed out to the Rensselaerville Institute in upstate New York to conduct our sixteenth annual seminar, which on that occasion was to be centered about biogenetics, its possible side effects — scientific, economic and political.

Something extra was added, however. Mark Chartrand (whom I had met years ago when he was Director of the Hayden Planetarium in New York) is a perennial faculty member at these seminars, and he had brought with him a thirty-minute TV cassette featuring fractals.

In just the last few years, you see, computers have become powerful enough to produce a fractal figure and slowly expand it millions and millions of times. They could do this with very complex fractals, not merely things as simple (and, therefore, uninteresting) as super

snowflakes and super trees. What's more, the whole thing was made more brilliant with false color.

We began to watch the cassette at 1:30 P.M. on Monday, July 25, 1988.

We started with a dark cardioid [heart-shaped] figure, that had small subsidiary figures about it, and little by little it grew larger on the screen. One subsidiary figure would slowly be centered and grow larger until it filled the screen and it could be seen that it was surrounded by subsidiary figures, too.

The effect was that of slowly sinking into complexity that never stopped being complex. Little objects that looked like tiny dots grew larger and revealed complexity while new little objects formed. It *never stopped*. For half an hour, we watched it as different parts of the figure were expanded into new visions of unceasing beauty.

It was absolutely hypnotic. I watched and watched, and after a while, I simply couldn't withdraw my attention. The whole was as close as I ever came, or could come, to *experiencing* infinity, instead of merely imagining it and talking about it.

When it was over, it was a wrench to come back to the real world.

I said dreamily to Janet, afterward. "I'm sure I was right in what I

said to Heinz that time. That's the Universe and science — endless — endless — endless. The job of science will never be done, it will just sink deeper and deeper into never ending complexity."

Janet frowned. "You still haven't written up that idea, though, have you?"

And I said, "No, I haven't."

But while we were at the Institute, we were isolated from the world. There were no newspapers, no radio, no television, and we were too busy with the details of the seminar to worry about that.

It wasn't until we got back to our apartment on the 27th, and I was leafing my way through the accumulated newspapers that I found out what had happened.

While we were in Rensselaerville, Heinz Pagels was attending an extended meeting on physics in Colorado. Pagels was also an enthusiastic mountain climber and, during the weekend break, on Sunday, July 24, he climbed Pyramid Peak, 14,000 feet high, along with a companion. He had lunch there and

at 1:30 P.M. (just twenty-four hours before I started watching the TV cassette) he started down the mountain.

He stepped on a rock that was loose. It trembled under him and he lost his balance. He went sliding down the mountainside and was killed. He was 49 years old.

I, totally unprepared, turned to one of the obituary pages and saw the scare headline. It was a bad and unexpected shock, and I must have cried out in unhappiness, for Janet came running and read the obituary over my shoulder.

I looked up at her sorrowfully and said, "Now he'll never have a chance to use my idea."

So now, at last, I have written it up. Partly, this was so I could say something about Heinz, whom I so admired. And partly, it's because I wanted to put the notion on paper so that (just possibly) someone, if not Heinz, *someone*, might be able to use it and do something with it.

After all, I can't. Just getting the idea represents my total ability. I can't move a centimeter beyond that.



Lucius Shepard wrote "A Wooden Tiger" (October 1988); his recent books include a novel, *LIFE DURING WARTIME*, and a collection, *THE JAGUAR HUNTER*. His powerful new novella concerns a New York writer who moves to a small village in Guatemala, looking for a change, though perhaps not so drastic a change as the one that is forced upon him. . .

# THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

**By Lucius Shepard**



HOSE WHOSE OFFICE IT is to debunk the supernatural are fond of pointing out

that incidences of paranormal activity most often take place in backwaters and rarely in the presence of credible witnesses, claiming that this in itself is evidence of the fraudulent character of the phenomena involved; yet it has occurred to me that the agents of the supernatural, especially those elements whose activities are directed toward evil ends, might well exhibit reticence in appearing before persons capable of verifying their existence and thus their threat to humankind. It seems surprising that such shadowy forces — if, indeed, they do exist — choose to appear before any witnesses at all, and equally surprising — if their powers are as vast as described in popular fiction — that they do not simply have done with us. Perhaps they are prevented from doing so by some restraint, a limit, say, on how many souls they are allowed to bag, and perhaps the fact that they manifest as they do is attributable to a binding

regulation similar to the one dictating that corporations (shadowy forces in themselves) must make a public notice of the date and location of their stockholders' meetings. In order to avoid scrutiny of their business practices, a number of corporations publish these notices in shoppers' guides and rural weeklies, organs unlikely to pass before the eyes of government agencies and reporters, and it makes sense that the supernatural might choose this same tactic as a means of compliance with a cosmic rule. That supposition may seem facetious, but my intent is quite serious, for while I cannot say with absolute certainty whether the circumstances that provoked my interest in these matters was in essence supernatural or merely an extraordinary combination of ordinary people and events, I believe that six months ago in Guatemala, a place notable for its inaccessibility and unreliable witnesses, I witnessed something rare and secret, something that may have reflected the exercise of a regulatory truth pertaining to both the visible and invisible worlds.

Prior to leaving for Guatemala, I had been romantically involved for the preceding three years with Karen Maniaci, a married woman who managed a Manhattan art gallery, and it was our breakup, which was marked by bitterness on my part and betrayal on hers, that persuaded me I needed a drastic change in order to get on with living. This process of persuasion lasted several months, months during which I wandered gloomily about New York, stopping in my tracks to stare at dark-haired women of approximately five feet nine in height and 120 pounds; and at length I concluded that I had better get out of town . . . either that or begin to play footsie with mental illness. I was thirty-seven and had grown too cautious to want to risk myself in a dangerous enterprise; yet there is a theatricality inherent in being jilted, a dramatic potential that demands resolution, and to satisfy it, I chose that other option of the heartbroken: a trip to some foreign shore, one isolate from the rest of the world, where there were no newspapers and no reminders of one's affair. Livingston, Guatemala, seemed to qualify as such. It was described in a guidebook that happened upon in The Strand bookstore as " . . . a quiet village at the egress of the Rio Dulce into the Caribbean, hemmed in against the sea by the Petén rain forest. Settled by black Caribes and the descendants of East Indian slaves brought by the British to work the sugar plantations upriver. There are no roads into Livingston. One reaches it either by ferry from Puerto Morales or by powerboat from Reunión at the junction of the Río

Dulce and the Petén highway. The majority of the houses are neat white stucco affairs with red tile roofs. The natives are unspoiled by tourism. In the hills above the village is a lovely tiered waterfall called Siete Altares (Seven Altars), so named because of the seven pools into which the stream whose terminus it forms plunges on its way to the sea. Local delicacies include turtle stew. . . ."

It sounded perfect, a paradise cut off from the grim political realities of the mother country, a place where a man could go to seed in the classic style, by day wandering the beach in a Bogart suit, waking each morning slumped over a table, an empty rum bottle beside his elbow, a stained deck of cards scattered around him with only the queen of hearts showing its face. A few days after reading the guidebook entry, following journeys by plane, train, and an overcrowded ferry, I arrived in Livingston. A few days after that, thanks to a meeting in one of the bars, I took possession of a five-room house of yellow stucco walls and concrete floors belonging to a young Spanish couple, doctors who had been studying with local *curanderos* and wanted someone to look after their pets — a marmalade cat and a caged toucan — while they toured for a year in the United States.

I have traveled widely all my life, and it has been my experience that guidebook descriptions bear little relation to actual places; however, though changes had occurred — most notably the discovery of the village by the singer Jimmy Buffett, whose frequent visits had given a boost to the tourist industry, attracting a smattering of young travelers, mainly French and Scandinavians who lived in huts along the beach — I discovered that the guidebook had not grossly exaggerated Livingston's charms. True, a number of shanty bars had sprung up on the beach, and there was a roach-infested hotel not mentioned in the book: three stories of peeling paint and cell-sized rooms furnished with torn mattresses and broken chairs. But the Caribe houses were in evidence; and the turtle stew was tasty; and the fishing was good; and Siete Altares was something out of a South Seas movie, each pool shaded by ceiba trees, their branches dripping with orchids, hummingbirds flitting everywhere in the thickets. And the natives were relatively unspoiled, perhaps because the tourists kept to the beach, which was separated from the village by a steep drop-off, and which — thanks to the bars and a couple of one-room stores — provided them with all the necessities of life.

Early on, I suffered a domestic tragedy. The cat ate the toucan, leaving

its beak and feet for me to find on the kitchen floor. But in general, things went well. I began to work, my mind was clearing, and the edge had been taken off my gloom by the growing awareness that other possibilities for happiness existed apart from a neurotic career woman who was afraid to trust her feelings, was prone to anxiety attacks and given to buying bracelets with the pathological avidity that Imelda Marcos once displayed toward the purchase of shoes. I soon fell into a pleasant routine, writing in the mornings, working on a cycle of short stories that — despite my intention of avoiding this pitfall — dealt with an unhappily married woman. Afternoons, I would lie in a hammock struck between two palms that sprouted from the patio of the house, and read. Evenings, I would stroll down to the beach with the idea of connecting with one of the tourist girls. I usually wound up drinking alone and brooding, but I did initiate a flirtation with an Odille LeCleuse, a Frenchwoman in her late twenties, with high cheekbones and milky skin, dark violet eyes and a sexy mouth that always looked as if she were about to purse her lips. She was in thrall — or so I'd heard — to Carl Konwicky, an Englishman of about my own age, who had lived on the beach for two years and supported himself by selling marijuana.

By all reports, Konwicky was a manipulator who traded on his experience to dominate less-seasoned travelers in order to obtain sex and other forms of devotion, and I couldn't understand how Odille, an intelligent woman with a degree in linguistics from the Sorbonne, could have fallen prey to the likes of him. I spotted him every day on the streets of the village: an asthenic, olive-skinned man, with a scraggly fringe of brown beard and a hawkish Semitic face. He commonly wore loose black trousers, an embroidered vest, and a Moroccan skullcap, and there was a deliberate languor to his walk, as if he were conscious of being watched; whenever he would pass by, he would favor me with a bemused smile. I felt challenged by him, both because of Odille and because my morality had been enlisted by what I'd heard of his smarty brand of gamesmanship, and I had the urge to let him know I saw through his pose. But realizing that — if Odille was involved with him — this kind of tactic would only damage my chances with her, I restrained myself and ignored him.

One night about two months after my arrival, I was going through old notebooks, searching for a passage that I wanted to include in a story, when a sheet of paper with handwriting on it slipped from between the

pages and fell to the floor. The handwriting was that of my ex-lover, Karen. I let it lie for a moment, but finally, unable to resist, I picked it up and discovered it to be a letter written early in the relationship. A portion read as follows:

*... When I went to the therapist today (I know ... I'll probably tell you all this on the phone later, but what the hell!), I told her about what happened, how I almost lost my job by making love to you those days in the office, and she didn't seem terribly surprised. When I asked her how a responsible adult who cares about her job could possibly jeopardize it in such a way, she simply said that there must have been a great deal of gain in it for me. It seems she's trying to lead me toward you — she's quite negative about Barry. But that's probably just wishful thinking — what she's doing is trying to lead me toward what I want. Of course, what I want is you, so it amounts to the same thing.*

It was curious, I thought, scanning the letter, how words that had once seemed precious could now seem so vapid. I noted the overusage of the words "terribly" and "terrible," particularly in conjunction with the words "surprising" and "surprised." That had been her basic reaction to falling in love, I realized. She had been terribly surprised. My God, she'd said to herself. *An emotion! Quick, I'll hie me to the head doctor and have it excised.* I read on.

*... I can't imagine living without you, Ray. When you said something the other day about the possibility of getting hit by a bus, I suddenly got this awful chill. I had a terrible sense of loss just hearing you say that. This is interesting, in that I used to try to figure out if I loved Barry by imagining something awful happening to him and seeing how I felt. I usually felt bad, but that's about it. ...*

I laughed out loud. The last I'd heard on the subject was that Barry, who bored Karen, whom she did not respect, who had recently gotten into rubber goods, was back in favor. Barry had one virtue that I did not: he was controllable, and in control there was security. She could go on lying to him, having affairs with no fear of being caught — Barry was big into denial. And now she was planning a child in an attempt to pave over the

potholes of the relationship, convincing herself that this secure fake was the best she could expect of life. She was due fairly soon, I realized. But it didn't matter. No act of hers could bring conscience and clarity into what had always been a charade. Her lies had condemned the three of us, and most of all, she had condemned herself by engaging in a kind of method living, chirping a litany of affirmation. "I think I can, I think I can," playing *The Little Adulthood That Could*, and thus losing the hope of her heart the strength of her soul. I imagined her at sixty-five, her beauty hardened to a grotesque brittleness, wandering through a mall, shopping for drapes thick enough to blot out the twenty-first century, while Barry shuffled along in her wake, trying to pin down the feeling that something had not been quite right all these years, both of them smiling and nodding, looking forward to a friendly gray fate.

The letter brought back the self-absorbed anguish that I'd been working to put behind me, and I felt — as I had for months prior to leaving New York — on the verge of exploding, as if a pressure were building to a hot critical mass inside me, making my thoughts flurry like excited atoms. My face burned; there were numbing weights in my arms and legs. I paced the room, unable to regain my composure, and after ten minutes or so, I flung open the door, frightening the marmalade cat, and stormed out into the dark.

I did not choose a direction, but soon I found myself on the beach, heading toward one of the shanty bars. The night was perfect for my mood. Winded: a constant crunch of surf and palm fronds tearing; combers rolling in, their plumed sprays as white as flame. A brilliant moon flashed between the fronts, creating shadows from even the smallest of projections, and set back from the shore, half-hidden in deep shadow among palms and sea grape and cashew trees, were huts with glinting windows and tin roofs. The beach was a ragged, narrow strip of tawny sand strewn with coconut litter and overturned cayucos. As I stepped over a cayuco, something croaked and leaped off into the rank weeds bordering the beach. My heart stuttered, and I fell back against the cayuco. It had only been a frog, but its appearance made me aware of my vulnerability. Even a place like Livingston had its dangers. Street criminals from Belize had been known to ride motorboats down from Belize City or Belmopan to rob and beat the tourists, and in my agitated state of mind, I would have made the perfect target.



The bar — Café Pluto — was set in the lee of a rocky point: a thatched hut with a sand floor and picnic-style tables, lit with black lights that emitted an evil purple radiance and made all the gringos glow like sun-burned corpses. Reggae from a jukebox at the rear was barely audible above the racket of the generator. I had several drinks in rapid succession, and ended up out front of the bar beside a topple palm trunk, drinking rum straight from the bottle and sharing a joint with Odille and a young blond Australian named Ryan, who was writing a novel, and whose mode of dress — slacks, shirt, and loosened tie — struck an oddly formal note. I was giddy with the dope, with the wildness of the nights, the vast blue-dark sky and its trillion watts of stars, silver glitters that appeared to be slipping around like sequins on a dancer's gown. Behind us the Café Pluto had the look of an eerie cave lit by seams of gleaming purple ore.

I asked Ryan what his novel was about, and, with affected diffidence, he said, "Nothing much. Saturday night in a working-class bar in Sydney." He took a hit of the joint, passed it to Odille. "It wasn't going too well, so I thought I'd set it aside and do something poetic. Run away to the ends of the earth." He had a look around, a look that in its casual sweep included the sea and sky and shore. "This is the ends of the earth, isn't it?"

I was caught by the poignancy of the images, thinking that he had inadvertently captured the essence of place and moment. I pictured the globe spinning and spinning, trailing dark frays of its own essential stuff, upon one of which was situated this slice of night and stars and expatriate woe, tatters with no real place in human affairs. . . . Wind veiled Odille's face with a drift of hair. I pushed it back, and she smiled, letting her eyelids droop. I wanted to take her back to the house and fuck her until I forgot all the maudlin bullshit that had been fucking me over the past three years.

"I hear you're doing some writing, too," said Ryan in a tone that managed to be both defiant and disinterested.

"Just some stories," I said, surprised that he would know this.

"Just some stories." He gave a morose laugh and said to the sky, "He's modest. . . . I love it." Then, turning a blank gaze on me: "No need to hide your light, man. We all know you're famous."

"Famous? Not hardly."

"Sure you are!" In a stentorian voice, he quoted a blurb on my last book. "'Raymond Kingsley, a mainstay of American fiction.'"

"Uh-huh, right."

"Even the Master of Time and Space thinks you're great," said Ryan. "And believe me, he's sparing with his praise."

"Who're you talking about?"

Ryan pointed behind me. "Him."

Carl Konwicki was coming down the beach. He ambled up, dropped onto the fallen palm trunk, and looked out to sea. Odille and Ryan seemed to be waiting for him to speak. Irritated by this obeisance, I belched. Konwicki let his eyes swing toward me, and I winked.

"How's she going?" I took a man-sized slug of rum, wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, and fixed him with a mean stare. He clucked his tongue against his teeth and said, "I'm fine, thank you."

"Glad to hear it." Drunk. I hated him, my hate fueled by the frustration that had driven me out of the house. Hate was chemical between us, the confrontational lines as sharply etched as the shadows on the sand. I gestured at his skullcap. "You lived in Morocco?"

"Some."

"What part?"

"You know . . . around." The wind bent a palm frond low, and for an instant, Konwicki's swarthy face was edged by a saw-toothed shadow.

"That's not very forthcoming," I said. "Do questions bother you?"

"Not ones that have a purpose."

"How about light conversation . . . that a worthwhile purpose?"

"Is that your purpose?"

"What else would it be?"

"Wow!" said Ryan. "This is like intense . . . like a big moment."

Odille giggled.

"I got it," I said. "What would you like to talk about? How about the translation you're doing . . . what is it?"

"The *Popol-Vuh*," said Konwicki distractedly.

"Gee," I said. "That's already been translated, hasn't it?"

"Not correctly."

"Oh, I see. And you're going to do it right." I had another pull on the rum bottle. "Hope you're not wasting your time."

"Time." Konwicki smiled, apparently amused by the concept; he refitted his gaze to the toiling sea.

"Yeah," I said, injecting a wealth of sarcasm into my voice. "It's pretty damn mind-bending, isn't it?"

The surf thundered; Konwicki met my eyes, imperturbable. "I've been looking forward to meeting you."

"Me, too," I said. "I hear you sell great dope." I clapped a hand to my brow as if recognizing that I had made a social blunder. "Pardon me. . . I didn't intend that to sound disparaging."

Konwicki gave me one of his distant smiles. "You're obviously upset about something," he said. "You should try to calm down."

I sat close beside him on the palm trunk, close enough to cause him to shift away, and was about to bait him further; but he stood, said, "Ta ra," and walked into the bar.

"I'd score that round even," said Ryan. "Mr. Kingsley dominating the first half, the Master coming on late."

Odille was gazing after Konwicki, wrapping a curl of hair around one forefinger. She gave me a wave, said, "I'll be back, O.K.?", and headed for the bar. I watched her out of sight, tracking the oiled roll of her hips beneath her cutoffs, and when I turned back to Ryan, he was smiling at me.

"What is it with them?" I asked.

"With Odille and the Master? Just a little now-and-then thing." He gave me a sly look. "Why? You interested?"

I snorted, had a hit of rum.

"You can win the lady," said Ryan. "If you've a stout heart."

I looked at him over the top of the bottle, but offered no encouragement.

"You see, Ray," said Ryan, affecting the manner of a lecturer, "Odille's a wounded bird. The poor thing had a disappointment in love back in Paris. She sought solace in distant lands and had the misfortune of meeting the Master. It's not much of a misfortune, you understand. The Master's not much of a Master, so he can't offer a great deal in the way of good or ill. But he confused Odille, made her believe he could show her how to escape pain through his brand of enlightenment. And that involved a bit of sack time."

Given this similarity in history between Odille and myself, I imagined fate had taken a hand by bringing us together. "So what can I do?"

"Things a bit hazy, are they, Ray?" Ryan chuckled. "Odille's grown disillusioned with the Master. She's looking for someone to burst his

bubble, to free her." He reached for the bottle, had a swig, and gagged. "God, that's awful!" He slumped against the toppled palm trunk, screwed the bottle into the sand so that it stood upright. The surf boomed; the wildfire whiteness of the combers imprinted afterimages on my eyes.

"Anyway," Ryan went on, "she's definitely looking for emotional rescue. But you can't go about it with *déclassé* confrontation. You'll have to beat the Master on his own terms, his own ground."

Perhaps it was the rum that let me believe that Ryan had a clear view of our situation. "What *are* his terms?" I asked.

"Games," he said. "Whatever game he chooses." He had another pull off the bottle. "He's afraid of you, you know. He's worried that you're into disciples, and all his children will abandon him for the famous writer. He realized he can't befuddle you with his usual quasi-erudite crap. So he'll come up with something new for you. I have no idea what. But he'll play some game with you. He's got to. . . . It's his nature."

"How's he befuddled you? You seem to have a handle on him."

"He's got no need," said Ryan. "I'm his fool, and a fool can know the king's secrets and make fun of them with impunity."

I started to ask another question, but let it rest. The wind pulled the soft crush of the surf into a breathy vowel; the moon had lowered behind the hills above the village, its afterglow fanning up into the heavens; the top of the sky had deepened to indigo, and the stars blazed, so dense and intricate in their array that I thought I might — if I were to try — be able to read there all scripture and truth in sparkling sentences. And it was not only in the sky that clarity ruled. What Ryan had said made sense. Odille was testing me . . . perhaps unconsciously, but testing me nonetheless, unwilling to abandon Konwicki until she was sure of me. I didn't resent this — it was a tactic often used in establishing relationships. But I was struck by how clear its uses seemed on the beach at Livingston. Not merely the social implications, but its elemental ones: the wounded lovers, the shabby Mephistophelian figure of Konwicki with his sacred books and petty need to exercise power. Man, woman, and Devil entangled in a sexual knot.

"Did I ever tell you my theory of the Visible?" I asked Ryan.

"We only just met," he reminded me.

"God, you're right! I've been under the illusion that we were old pals." I plucked the rum bottle from the sand and drank. "In places like this, I've

always thought it was possible to see how things really are between people. To discern relationships that are obscured by the clutter of urban life. The old relationships, the archetypes."

He stared blearily up at me. "Sounds bloody profound, Ray."

"Yeah, I suppose it is," I said, and then added: "Profundity's my business. Or maybe it's bullshit . . . one or the other."

"So," he said, "are you going to play?"

"I think so . . . yeah."

"Beautiful," said Ryan. "That's really beautiful."

A few moments later, Konwicki and Odille came out of the bar and walked toward us, deep in conversation.

Ryan laughed and laughed. "Let the games begin," he said.

WE TALKED on the beach for another hour, smoking Konwicki's dope, which smoothed out the rough edges of my drunk, seeming to isolate me behind a thick transparency. I withdrew from the conversation, watching Konwicki. I wasn't gauging his strengths and weaknesses; despite my exchange with Ryan, I had not formalized the idea that there was to be a contest between us. I was merely observing, intrigued by his conversational strategy. By sidestepping questions, claiming to know nothing about a subject, he managed to intimate that the subject was not worth knowing and that he possessed knowledge in a sphere of far greater relevance to the scheme of things. Odille hung on his every word for a while, but soon began to lose interest, casting glances and smiles at me; it appeared she was trying to maintain a connection with Konwicki, but was losing energy in that regard.

For the most part, Konwicki avoided looking at me; but at one point, he cut his eyes toward me and locked on. We stared at each other for a long moment, then he turned away with acknowledgment. During that moment, however, the skin on my face went cold, my muscles tensed, and a smile stretched my lips. A feral smile funded by a remorseless hatred quite different from the impassioned, drunken loathing I originally had felt. This emotion, like the smile, seemed something visited upon me and not an intensification of my emotions, and along with it came a sudden increase in my body temperature. A sweat broke on my forehead, my chest and arms, and my vision reddened, and I had a peculiar sense of doubled perceptions, as if I were looking through two different pairs of eyes, one of

which was capable of seeing a wider spectrum. I decided to slack off on the rum.

At length, Konwicki suggested we get out of the wind, which was blowing stronger, and go over to his place to listen to music. I was of two minds about the proposal; while I wasn't ready to give up on Odille, neither was I eager to mix it with Konwicki, and I was certain that if I went with them, there would be some bad result. The dope had taken the edge off my enthusiasm. But Odille took my hand, nudged the softness of her breast into my arm.

"You are coming, aren't you?" she said.

"Sure," I said, as if a thought to the contrary had never occurred.

We walked together along the beach, trailing Konwicki and Ryan, and Odille talked about taking a trip to Escuilpas someday soon to see the Black Virgin in the cathedral there.

"Women come from all over Central America to be blessed," she said. "They stand in line for days. Huge fat women in white turbans from Belize. Crippled old island ladies from Roatán. Beautiful slim girls from Panama. All waiting to spend a few seconds kneeling in the shadow of a black statue. When I first heard about it, I thought it sounded primitive. Now it seems strangely modern. The New Primitivism. I keep imagining all those female shadows in the bright sun, radios playing, vendors selling cold drinks." She gave her hair a toss. "I could use that sort of blessing."

"Is it only for women?"

She let her eyes drift toward me. "Sometimes men wait with them."

I asked if what Ryan had told me about her love affair in Paris was the truth. I had no hesitancy in asking this — intimacies were the flavor of the night. A flicker of displeasure crossed her face. "Ryan's an idiot."

"I doubt he'd argue the point."

Odille went a few steps in silence. "It was nothing. A fling, that's all." Her glum tone seemed to belie this.

"Yeah, I had a fling myself right before I came down here. Like to have killed me, that fling."

She glanced up at me, still registering displeasure, but then she smiled. "Perhaps with us it's a matter of. . ." She made a frustrated gesture, unable to find the right words.

"Victims recognizing the symptoms?" I suggested.

"I suppose." She threw back her head and looked up into the sky as

if seeking guidance there. "Yes, I had a bad experience, but I'm over it."

"Completely?"

She shook her head. "No . . . never completely. And you?"

"Hey, I'm fine," I said. "It's like it never happened."

She laughed, cast an appraising look my way. "Who was she?"

"This married woman back in New York."

"Oh!" Odille put a hand on my arm in sympathy. "That's the worst, isn't it? Married, I mean."

"The worst? I don't know. It was pretty goddamn bad."

"What was she like?"

"Frightened. She got married because she had a run of back luck. . . . At least, that's what she told me. Things started going bad around her. Her parents got divorced, her dog ran away, and that seemed a sign something worse might happen. I guess she thought marriage would protect her." I walked faster. "She's a fucking mess."

"How so?"

"She doesn't know what the hell she wants. Whenever she doubts something, she'll broadcast an opinion pro or con until the contrary opinion has been shouted down in her own mind." I kicked at the sand. "The last time we talked, she explained how she was happy in her marriage for the same reasons that she'd once claimed to be miserable. The vices of this guy who she'd ridiculed. . . . She told everyone how much he bored her, how childish he was. All those vices had been transformed into solid virtues. She told me she knew that she couldn't have the kind of relationship with Barry — that's her husband — that we'd had, but you had to make trade-offs. Barry at least always wore a neatly pressed suit and could be counted on not to embarrass — though never to scintillate — at business functions." I sniffed. "As a husband, he made the perfect accessory for evening wear."

"You sound bitter."

"I am. She put me through hell. Of course, I bought into it, so I've got no one to blame but myself."

"She was beautiful, of course?"

"She didn't think so." I changed the subject. "Was yours married?"

"No, just a shit." Her expression became distant, and I knew that for a moment she was back in Paris with the Shit. "For a long time afterward, I threw myself into other relationships. I thought that would

help, but it was a mistake. . . . I can see that now."

"Everything seems like a mistake afterward," I said.

"Not everything," she said coyly.

I wasn't sure how to take that, and it wasn't just that her meaning was vague; it was also that I was put off by her coyness. Before I could frame a response, she said, "Talking to Carl has helped me a great deal."

"Oh, I see." I tried to disguise my disappointment, believing this to be a sign that her connection with Konwicki was still vital.

"No, you don't. Just having someone to talk to was helpful. Carl's a fraud, of course. Nothing he says is without guile. But he does listen, and it's hard to find a good listener. That's basically all there was between us. I helped him with his work, and . . . there was more. But it wasn't important."

I wondered if she was playing with me, making me guess at her availability, and was briefly angered by the possibility; but then, recalling how uncertain my own motivations and responses had been. I decided that if I couldn't forgive her, I couldn't forgive myself.

"What are you thinking about?" Odille asked.

Her features, refined by the moonlight, looked delicate, etched, as if a kind of lucidity had been revealed in them, and I believed that I could see down beneath the games and the layers of false construction, beneath all those defenses, to who she most was, to the woman, no longer an innocent in the accepted sense of the word, but innocent all the same, still hopeful in spite of pain and disillusionment.

"Konwicki," I lied. "You helped him translate the *Popol-Vuh*?"

"He was being discreet. He's acquired an old Mayan game and some papers that go with it. That's what he's translating."

"What sort of game?"

"From what I've been able to gather, it's a role-playing game. The papers seem to imply that it has to do with spirit travel. The gods. All the old cultures have myths that deal with that. It might be something that the priests used to evoke trances . . . something like that."

For no reason I could determine, this news made me edgy.

"Is that really what you were thinking about?" Odille asked.

"I was being discreet," I said, and she laughed.

Konwicki's place was a thatched hut with one large room and a sand



floor over which a carpet of dried palm fronds had been laid, and was a scrupulously neat advertisement for his travels. Wall hangings from Peru, a brass hookah, a Japanese scroll, a bowl holding some Nepalese jewelry—rings of coral and worked silver, pillows embroidered in a pattern of turquoise thread that I recognized as being from Isfahan. Gourd bowls and various cooking implements hung from pegs, and a hurricane lantern provided a flickering orange light. An old Roxy Music album was playing on a cassette recorder, Bryan Ferry's nostalgia seeming more effete than usual in those surroundings. In one corner was an orange crate containing a stack of papers covered with Mayan hieroglyphs. I started to pick up the top paper, and Konwicki, who was sitting against the rear wall, rolling a joint, said, "Don't touch that . . . please!"

"What's the problem? My vibes might unsettle the spiritual fabric?"

"Something like that." He licked the edge of the rolling paper.

Ryan had stretched out on his back between Konwicki and a cardboard box that held some clay figures, a comic book spread open over his eyes; Odille was on her knees facing Konwicki, watching him roll.

"Why don't you tell me what else is off-limits?" I said.

He lit the joint, let smoke trickle from his nostrils. "Did you come here just to be contentious?" he asked.

"I'm not sure why I came," I said. "I figured you'd tell me."

He gave a shrug, blew more smoke. "Why are you so hostile?"

I dropped down cross-legged next to Odille. "You know what's going on here, man. But for one thing. I don't like guys like you . . . guys who want to grow up to be Charles Manson, but don't have the balls, so they hang out and maneuver weaker people into fucking them."

I said this mildly, and that was not a pose; I felt calm, without malice, merely making an observation. My dislike of Konwicki—it appeared—had shifted into a philosophical mode.

"And what sort of person are you?" he asked with equal mildness.

"Why don't you tell me?"

He made a show of sizing me up. "How about this? A horny, lonely man who's having trouble adjusting to the onset of middle age."

"Gee, Carl," I said. "I like my kind of guy a lot better than I do yours."

He sniffed, amused. "There's no accounting for taste." He passed me the joint, and in the spirit of the moment, took a hit, let it circulate, then took another, deeper one. Seconds later I realized that Konwicki had

exercised the home-field advantage in our little war and pulled out his killer weed. Even though I was already ripped, I could feel its effects moving through me like a cool, soft wind; it was the kind of weed that immobilizes, the kind with which you need to plan where you want your body to fall. My thoughts became muddled; my extremities felt cold. Yet when the joint was passed to me again, I had still another hit, not wanting to seem a wimp.

"Good shit, huh?" said Konwicky, watching Ryan suck on the joint.

"Gawd!" said Ryan, leaking smoke. "What clarity!"

I'm not sure why I reached for the clay figurines in the box next to Ryan — the need to hold on to something, probably. The wind tattering the thatch made a sound like something huge being torn apart. The inconstant wash of orange light along the walls mesmerized me, and the lantern flame itself was too bright to look at directly. In every minute event, I perceived myriad subtleties, and I could have sworn I was floating a couple of inches above the ground. Perhaps I thought the figurine would give me ballast, bring me back down, because I was blitzed, wrecked, fucked-up. My hand moved in slow motion, effecting a lovely arc toward the box that contained the figurines. But the second I picked one up, I was cured of my sensory overload and felt stone-cold sober, in absolute control.

"Christ!" said Konwicky with annoyance. "Put that down!"

The figurine was a pre-Columbian dwarf of yellowish brown clay with stumpy legs, a potbelly, a hooked nose, and thick, brutish lips. The eyes were slitted folds. About the size of a Barbie doll. Ugly as a wart. Holding it gave me focus and made me feel not merely whole, but powerful. The only remnant of my buzz was a sense that the figurine was full of something heavy and shifting, like a dollop of mercury. It seemed to throb in my hand.

"Put it down!" Konwicky's tone had become anxious.

"Why? Is it valuable?" I turned the figure, examining it from every angle. "Don't worry, man! I won't drop it."

"Just put it down, all right?"

Holding the figurine in my left hand, away from Konwicky, I leaned forward and saw that the cardboard box contained five more figurines, all standing. "What are they? They look like a set."

Konwicky held out his hand for the figurine, but I was feeling more

and more in control. As if the figurine were a strengthening magic. I wasn't about to let it go. Odille, I saw, was regarding Konwicki with distaste.

"I'm not going to drop it, man. You think I'm too stoned or something? Hey" — I flashed him a cheery grin — "I feel great. Tell me what they are."

Ryan, too, was staring at Konwicki; he laughed suddenly and said in an Actors' Equity German accent, "Tell him, Master."

Konwicki grimaced like a man much put upon. "They're part of a game. An old Mayan game. I bought it off a *chiclero* in Flores."

"Really?" I said. "How do you play?"

"I can set the figures up, but I don't know what happens after that."

"If you know how to set them up, you must know something about it."

An exasperated sigh. "All right . . . I'll set them up, but be careful."

A long piece of plyboard was leaning against the wall to his left; it was stained a rusty orange and marked with a mosaic of triangular zones. He laid the board flat and arranged the five figures, three at the corners, the other two at the center edge opposite one another. The corner nearest me was vacant, and after a brief hesitation, I set the dwarf down upon it.

"What next?" I said.

"I told you. I don't know. Whoever's playing picks one of the figures to be his corner. But after that. . . ." He shrugged.

"How many can play?"

"From two to six people."

"Why don't you and I give it a shot?" I said.

It was curious how I felt as I said that. I was giving him an order, one I knew he'd obey. And I was eager for him to obey. I wanted him on the board, vulnerable to my moves, even though I didn't know what moves existed. That animal grin that had first manifested itself in front of the Café Pluto once again spread across my face.

"Come on, Carl," I said mockingly. "Don't you want to play?"

He pretended to be complying for the sake of harmony, giving Odille a glance that said, *What can I do?*, and stretched out his hand, letting it hover above the figurines as if testing a discharge that issued from the head of each. At last he touched a clay warrior with a feathered headdress and a long spear. I felt less competent, and my thoughts frayed once again; it appeared that my relapse had boosted Konwicki's spirits. His bland smile switched on, and he leaned back against the wall. The noise of wind

and sea smoothed out into a slow, oscillating roar, as if something big and winged were making leisurely flights around the outside of the hut.

On impulse, I picked up the dwarf, and, suddenly brimming with gleeful hostility, I set it down beside a figurine at the center of the board, a lumpy female gnome with a prognathous jaw and slack breasts. Konwicki countered by moving a figurine resembling a squat infant to the side of his warrior. Thereafter we made a number of moves in rapid succession using the same four figurines. Complex moves, each consisting of more than one figurine, sometimes in tandem, utilizing every portion of the board. The entire process could not have taken more than a few minutes, but I could have sworn the game lasted for an hour at least. The room had been transformed into a roaring cell that channeled the powers of wind and sea, drew them into a complex circuit. A weight was shifting inside me, shifting just as the interior weights of the figurines seemed to shift, as if some liquid were being tipped this way and that, guiding my hand. Along with the apprehension of strength was the feeling of a separate entity at work, a quick, nasty brute of a being with a potbelly and arms like tree trunks, grunting and scuttling here and there, stinking of clay and blood. And yet I maintained enough sense of myself to be afraid. Things were getting out of hand, I realized, but I had no means of controlling them. As I stared at the board, it began to appear immense, to exhibit an undulating topography, and I could feel myself dwindling, becoming lost among those rust-colored swells and declivities, coming closer to some terrible danger.

And then it was over . . . the game, the feelings of power and possession. Konwicki tried a smile, but it wouldn't stick. He looked wasted, worn-out. Exactly how I felt. Despite the intensity and strangeness of what I had experienced, I blamed it all on substance abuse. And I was sick of games, of repartee. I struggled to my feet, held out a hand to Odille. "You want to take a walk?" I asked.

I'd expected that she would look to Konwicki for approval or for some sort of validation; but without hesitation, she let me help her to stand.

"Carl," I said with my best anchorman sincerity. "It's been fun."

He kept his face deadpan, but in his eyes was a shine that struck me as virulent, venomous. "That's how it is, huh?" he said, directing his words. I thought, to neither me nor Odille, but to the space between us.

"Night, all," I said, and steered Odille toward the door. I kept waiting for Konwicki to make some hostile remark; but he remained silent, and

we got through the door without incident. We went along the edge of the shore, and after we had gone about thirty yards, Odille said, "You don't want to walk, do you, Raymond? Tell me what you really want."

"This how it is in Paris?" I said. "Everything made clear beforehand?"

"This isn't Paris."

"How are you with honesty?" I asked.

"Sometimes not so good." She shrugged as if to say that was the best she could offer.

"You're a beautiful woman," I said. "Intelligent, appealing. I'm tired of being in pain. Whatever possibilities exist for us . . . that's what I want."

She made a noncommittal noise.

"What?" I said.

"I thought you'd say you loved me."

"I want to love you, and that's the same thing," I said. "What the depth of my feelings are at this moment doesn't matter. One thing I've learned about love . . . you're a fool if you judge it by how dizzy it makes you feel." To an extent, this was a lie I was telling myself, but it was such a clever lie that it came cloaked in the illuminative suddenness of a truth recognized, allowing me to adopt the role of a sincere man struggling to be honest . . . which was the case. Perhaps we are all such fraudulent creatures at heart that we must find a good script before we can successfully play at being honest.

"But the dizziness," said Odille. "That's important, too."

"I'm starting to get dizzy now. How about you?"

"You're a clever man, Raymond," she said after a pause. "I don't know if I'm a match for you."

"If I'm so damned clever, don't try and baffle me with humility."

She said nothing, but the wind and surf and the thudding of coconuts falling onto the sand seemed an affirmation. At last she stood on tiptoe, and her lips grazed my cheek. "Let's go home," she whispered.

Late that night, Odille came astride me. Her skin gleamed palely in the moonlight shining through the window, her black hair stuck to the sweat on her shoulders in eloquent curls, and each of her rapid exhalations was cored with a frail note as if she were singing under her breath. Her breasts were small and long and slightly pendulous, with puffy dark areolae, reminding me of *National Geographic* breasts, shaped something like the

slippers Aladdin wears in illustrations from *The Arabian Nights*; and her features looked so cleanly drawn as to appear stylized. Her delicacy, its exotic particularity, inspired desire, affection, passion. And one thing more, an emotion that underlay the rest: the need to degrade her. Part of my mind rebelled against this urge, but it was huge in me, a brutish drive, and I hooked my fingers into the plump meat of her thighs, gripping hard enough to leave bruises, and began to use her roughly. To my surprise, she responded in kind; her fingernails raked my chest, and soon our lovemaking evolved into a savage contest that lasted nearly until dawn.

I slept no more than a few hours, and even that was troubled by a dream in which I found myself in a dwarfish, heavily muscled body with ocher skin, crouching on the crest of a dune of rust-colored sand, one that overlooked a complex of black pyramids. A hot wind blew fans of grit into the air, stinging my face and chest. The complex appeared to be a mile or so away, but I knew this was an illusion created by the clarity of the air, and that it would take me hours to reach the buildings. I knew many things about the place. I knew, for instance, that the expanse of sand between the dune and the complex was rife with dangers, and I also knew that there was life within the complex . . . a form of life dangerous to me. I understood this was a dream, albeit of an unusual sort, and that awareness was, I thought, a kind of wakefulness, leading me to believe that the dangers involved were threats not only to my dream self but to my physical self as well. Yet despite this knowledge, I was moved to start walking toward the complex.

I walked for about an hour, growing dehydrated and faint from the heat. The buildings seemed no nearer to hand, and the sun was a violet-white monster, seething with prominences, that looked much closer than the sun with which I was familiar, and although great banks of silvery-edged gray clouds were crossing the sky with the slowness of cruising galleons, they never once obscured the sun, breaking apart as they drew near to permit its continued radiance, re-forming once they had passed. It was as if the light were a solid barrier, an invisible cylindrical artifact around which they were forced to detour. Crabs with large pincers, their shells almost the same color as the sand, burrowed in the dunes; they were quite aggressive, occasionally chasing me away from their homes . . . or hunting me.

After another hour, I came to an exceptionally smooth stretch of sand,

lying flat as a pond, in this wholly unlike the rest of the desert, which wind had sculpted into an infinite sequence of undulations and rises, and in color a shade more coppery. The world was so quiet that I could hear the whine of my circulatory system, and I was afraid to step forward, certain that the sand hid some peril; I supposed it to be something in the order of quicksand. At last, deciding to give it a test, I unbuckled the belt that held my sheathed knife (I was not in the least surprised to discover that I had a knife), and, removing the weapon, I tossed the belt out onto the sand. For a moment, it lay undisturbed. But then the sand beneath it began to circulate in the manner of a slow whirlpool. I sprang back from the edge of the sand, retreating into the lee of a dune, just as the whirlpool erupted, spraying coppery orange filaments high into the air, filaments that were — I realized as they fell back to earth around me — serpents with flat, questing heads, the largest of them seven or eight feet in length. The pit from which they had been spewed was expanding. I scrambled higher on the dune, clawing at the sand, and gazed down into a vast maw, where thousands of white sticks — human bones, I saw — were being pushed up and then scattered downward as if falling off the shoulders of a huge, dark presence that was forcing its way up through them from some unimaginable depth. . . .

At that moment I waked, blinking against the sunlight, still snared by the tag ends of the dream, still trying to climb out of danger to the top of the dune, and discovered Odille propped on an elbow, looking down at me with a concerned expression. The sight of her seemed to nullify all the fearful logic of the dream, and I felt foolish for having been so caught up in it. The corners of Odille's lips hitched up in a faint smile. "You were tossing about," she said. "So I woke you. I'm sorry if. . . ."

"No," I said, "I'm glad you did. I was having a bad dream." I boosted myself to a sitting position. My muscles ached, and dried blood striped my chest. "Jesus Christ!" I said, staring at the scratches; I remembered how it had been the previous night and was embarrassed.

"Are you all right?" Odille asked.

"I don't know," I said. "You . . . did I . . . ?"

"Hurt me? I have some bruises. But it looks to me" — she pointed at my abrasions — "that you lost the battle."

"I'm sorry," I said, still flustered. "I don't know what got into me. I've never . . . I mean, last night. I've never been like that . . . not so. . . ."

She put a forefinger to my lips. "Nor have I. But apparently, it's what we both wanted. Maybe we needed it, maybe. . . ." She made an angry noise.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm just sick of explaining myself in terms of the past."

I thought I knew her meaning, and I wondered if that was what it had been for both us — a usage of each other's bodies in order to inflict pain on phantom lovers. I pulled her down, let her rest on my shoulder; her hair fanned across my chest, cool and heavy and silky. I wanted to say something, but nothing came to mind. The pressure of her body aroused me, but I felt tender now, empty of that perverse lust that had enlivened me hours before. She shifted her head so she could see my eyes.

"I won't ask what you're thinking," she said.

"Nothing bad."

"Then I will ask."

"I was thinking about making love with you again."

She made a pleased noise. "Why don't you?"

I turned to face her, drawing her against me, but as we began to kiss, to touch, I realized I was afraid of making love, of reinstituting that fierce animalism. That puzzled me. In retrospect, I had been somewhat repelled by my behavior, but in no way frightened. Yet now I had a sense that I might be opening myself to some danger, and I recalled how I'd felt while playing the game with Konwicki — there had been a feeling identical to that I'd had during our lovemaking. One of helplessness, of possession. I forced myself to dismiss all that, and soon my uneasiness passed. The sun melted like butter across the bed, and the sounds of morning, of birds and the sea and a woman vendor crying, "*Coco de aguas*," came through the window like music to flesh out the rhythm that we made.

**F**OR A month or thereabouts, I believe that I was happy. Odille and I began to make a life, an easy and indulgent life that seemed in its potentials for pleasure and consolation proof against any outside influence. It was not only our sexuality that was a joy; we were becoming good friends. I came to see that like many attractive women, she had a poor self-image, that she had been socialized to believe that beauty was a kind of cheapness, a reason for shame, and that her disastrous affair might have been a self-destructive act performed to compensate for a sense of worthlessness. Saying it like that is an over-



simplification, but it was in essence true, and I thought that she had known her affair would be ill-fated; I wondered if my own affair had been similar, a means of punishment for a shameful quality I perceived in myself, and I wondered further if our budding relationship might not have the same impetus. But I should have had no worries in that regard. Everything — sex, conversation, domestic interaction — was too easy for us; there was no great tension involved, no apprehension of loss. We were healing each other, and although this was a good thing, a healthy thing, I missed that tension and realized that its absence was evidence of our impermanence. I tried to deny this, to convince myself that I was in love with her as deeply as I had been in love with Karen, and to an extent my self-deception was a success. Atop the happiness we brought to one another, I installed a level of passionate intensity that served to confound my understanding of the relationship, to counterfeit the type of happiness that I believe necessary to maintain closeness. Yet even at my happiest, I had the intimation of trouble hovering near, of a menace not yet strong enough to effect its will. And as time wore on, I began to have recurring dreams that centered upon those black pyramids in the rust-colored desert.

At the outset, all the dreams were redolent of the first, dealing with dangers overcome in the desert. But eventually I made my way into the complex. The pyramids were enormous, towering several hundred feet high, and as I've said were reminiscent of old Mayan structures, with fancifully carved roof combs and steep stairways leading up the faces to temples set atop them, all of black stones polished to a mirror brilliance that threw back reflections of my body — no longer that of a dwarf, but my own, as if the dwarf were merely a transitional necessity — and were joined with incredible precision, the seams almost microscopic. The sand had drifted in over the ebony flagstones, lying in thin curves, and torpid serpents were coiled everywhere, some slithering along leisurely, making sinuous tracks in the sand. Here and there I saw human bones half-buried in the sand, most so badly splintered that it was impossible to tell from which part of the body they had come. Many of the buildings had been left unfinished or else had been designed missing one or more outer walls, so that passing beside them, I had views of their labyrinthine interiors: mazes of stairways that led nowhere, ending in midair, and oddly shaped cubicles.

Before entering the complex, I had been visited with certain knowledge

that the buildings were not Mayan in origin, that the Mayan pyramids were imperfect copies of them; but had I not intuitively known this, I might have deduced it from the nature of the carvings. They were realistic in style and depicted nightmare creatures — demons with spindly legs, grotesque barbed phalli, and flat, snakelike heads with gaping mouths and needle teeth and fringed with lank hair — who were engaged in dismembering and otherwise violating human victims. In a plaza between two pyramids, I came upon a statue of one of these creatures, wrought of the same black stone, giving its skin a chitinous appearance. It stood thirty feet in height, casting an obscenely distorted shadow; the sun hung behind its head at an oblique angle, creating a blinding corona of violet-white glare that masked its features and appeared to warp the elongated skull. But the remainder of its anatomy was in plain view. I ran my eyes along the statue, taking in clawed feet; knees that looked to be double-jointed; the distended sac of scrotum and the tumescent organ; jutting hipbones; the dangling hooked hands, each finger wickedly curved and tipped with a talon the length of a sword; the belly swollen like that of a wasp. I was mesmerized by the sight, ensnared by a palpable vibration that seemed to emanate from the figure, by an alluring resonance that made me feel sick and dizzy and full of buzzing, incoherent thoughts. From beneath heavy orbital ridges, the eyes glinted as if cored with miniature suns, and my shock at this semblance of life broke the statue's hold on me. I backed away, then turned and sprinted for my life. . . .

I came back to consciousness thrashing around in the dark, hot bedroom. Odille was still asleep, and I slid out from beneath the sheet, being careful not to wake her. I crossed to the door that led to the living room, my heart pounding, skin covered with a sheen of sweat. The room beyond was slashed by a diagonal of moonlight spilling through the window, and the furniture cast knife-edged shadows on the floor. I wiped my forehead with the back of my arm and was startled by the coldness and smoothness of my skin. I looked at my arm, and the feeling of cold ran all through me — the skin on my wrist and hand was black and shining like polished stone, channeling streams of moonlight along it. I let out a gasp, and holding my arm away from me, I staggered into the living room and onward into the kitchen, the arm banging against the door, making a heavy metallic sound. I tripped, spun around, trying to keep my balance, and fetched up against the sink. I didn't want to look at the arm again, but

when I did, I was giddy with relief. Nothing was wrong with it; it was pale and articulated with muscle. A normal human arm. I touched it to make sure. Normal. I leaned against the sink, taking deep breaths. I stayed there for another fifteen minutes, trying to counter the dream and its attendant hallucination with rationalizations. I was smoking too much dope, I told myself; I'd lived for too long under emotional pressure. Or else something was very wrong.

Houses and intricate buildings in dreams, says Freud, signify women, and for this reason, I supposed that the pyramids might be related to my experiences with Karen — a notion assisted by the patent sexuality of the serpent imagery. There was no doubt that I had been damaged by the affair. For a year and a half prior to falling in love with her, I had been forced to watch my father die of cancer, and had spent all my time in taking care of him. My resources had been at a low ebb when Karen had come along, and I'd seen her as a salvation. I'd been obsessed with her, and the slow process of rejection — itself as lingering as a cancer — had turned the power of my obsession against me, throwing me into a terrible depression that I had tried to remedy with cocaine, a drug that breeds its own obsessions and eventually twist one's concept of sexuality. I wondered if I was still obsessed, if I was sublimating the associated drives into my dream life. But I rejected that possibility. All that was left of my feelings for Karen was a vengeful reflex that could be triggered against my will, and it occurred to me that this was a matter of injured pride, of anger at myself for having allowed that sad woman to control and torment me. The dreams, I thought, might well be providing a ground for my anger, draining off its vital charge. And yet I couldn't rid myself of the suspicion that the dreams and the game I had played with Konwicki were at the heart of some arcane process, and one morning as I walked along the beach, I turned my steps in the direction of Konwicki's hut, hoping that he might be able to shed some light on the matter.

I hadn't spoken to him since the night of the game, and I had seen him only twice, then at a distance; in the face of that, it was logical to assume that he had come to terms with what had happened. But the instant his hut came into view, I tensed and began to anticipate a confrontation. Ryan was sitting outside, dressed with uncharacteristic informality in cutoffs and a short-sleeved shirt; his head was down, knees drawn up. When

he heard my footsteps, he jumped to his feet and stood in front of the door.

"You can't go in," he said as I came up.

I was taken aback by that, and also by his pathetic manner. His eyes darted side to side as if expecting a new threat to materialize; nerves twitched in his jaw, and his hands were in constant motion, plucking at his cutoffs, fingers rubbing together. He looked paler, thinner.

"What's the problem, man?" I asked.

"You can't go in," he said stubbornly.

"I just want to talk to him."

He shook his head.

"What's the hell wrong with you?"

Konwicki's voice floated out from the hut. "It's all right, Ryan."

I brushed past Ryan, saying, "You better get yourself together," and went on in. The light was bad, a brownish gloom, and Konwicki was sitting cross-legged against the rear wall; beside him was something bumpy covered by a white cloth, and noticing a corner of orange wood protruding from the cloth, I realized that he had been fooling around with the game.

"What can I do for you?" he said in a dry tone. "Sell you some drugs?"

I sat down close to him, off to the side, so I could watch the door; the dried palm fronds crunched beneath my weight. "How you been?"

He made a noise of amusement. "I've been fine, Ray. And you?"

I gestured at the covered board. "Playing with yourself?"

A chuckle. "Just studying a bit. Working on my project, you know."

I didn't believe him. There was a new solidity to his assurance, and I suspected it had something to do with the figures and the board. "Are you learning how to play it?" I asked.

After a silence, framing his words with — it seemed — a degree of caution, he said. "It's not something you can learn . . . not like chess, anyway. It's more of a role-playing game. It's essential to develop an affinity with one's counter. Then the rules — or rather, the potentials — become evident."

The light was so dim that the details of his swarthy features were indistinct, making it difficult to detect nuances of expression. But I had the feeling he was laughing at me. I didn't want to let him know that I was leery about the game, and I changed the subject. "Sounds interesting. But that's not why I came here. I wanted to" — I pretended to be search-

ing for the right words — "clear the air. I thought we could. . . ."

"Be friends?" said Konwicki.

"I was hoping we could at least put an end to any lingering animosity. We're all going to be living here for a while, and it's pointless to be carrying on petty warfare . . . even if it's only giving each other the cold shoulder."

"That's very reasonable of you, Ray."

"Are you going to be reasonable? You and Odille were done before I came along. You must be aware of that."

"If you knew me, you wouldn't approach me this way."

"That's why I'm here . . . to get to know you."

"Just like a Yank, to think he can know something through talking." Konwicki's hand strayed toward the board as if by reflex, but he did not complete the movement. "I don't let go of things easily. I hang on to them, even things I don't really want. Unless I'm made to let go."

I ignored the implicit challenge. "Why's that?"

Konwicki leaned back and folded his arms, a shift in posture that conveyed expansiveness. "I've traveled in America," he said. "I've seen slums in Detroit, New York, Los Angeles. Ghastly ruins. Much more terrible in their physical entity than anything in England. But there's still vitality in America, even in the slums. Some of the slums in London, they're absolutely without vitality. Gray places with here and there a petunia in a flowerpot brightening a cracked window, and old toothless women, and children with stick arms and legs, and women whose bodies are too sallow and sickly to sell, and men whose brains have shrunk to the size of their balls. All of hem moving about like people in a dream. Bending over to sniff at corpses, poking their fingers in a fire to see how hot it is. So much trash and foulness lying about that the streets stink even when they're frozen. To be born there is like being born on a planet where the gravity is so strong you can't escape it. It's not something you can resist with anger or violence. It's like treacle has been poured over you, and you crawl around in it like a fly with your wings stuck together. I've never escaped. I've run around the world; I've cultivated myself and given myself an education. I've developed refined sensibilities. But everywhere I've gone, I've carried that gravity with me, and I'm the same ignorant, bloody-minded sod I always was. So don't you tell me something's not good for me. I'll want it more than ever. Things that aren't good for me

make me happy. And don't say that something's done. I'm too damn stupid to accept it. And too damn greedy."

Despite its passion, there was a hollowness to this statement, and after he had done, I said, "I don't believe you."

He gave a caustic laugh. "That's good, Ray. That's very perceptive. I've other imperatives now. But it used to be true."

I let his words hang in the air for a bit, then said, "Have you been having odd dreams lately?"

"I dream all the time. What sort of dreams are you talking about?"

"About the game we played."

"The game? This game?" He touched the cloth covering the board.

I nodded.

"No . . . why? Are you?"

His mocking voice told me that he was not being direct, and I realized there was no use in continuing the conversation; either he was lying, or else he was running yet another game on me, hoping to make me think he knew something by means of arch denial. I tried to dismiss the importance of what I'd said. "A couple . . . just weird shit. I haven't been sleeping well."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

If Konwicki was dreaming of that strange desert, if there was an occult reality to the game we'd played. I knew — because of my partial admission — I must look like a fool to him; to me, with his arms folded, half-buried in the dimness, he seemed as impenetrable as a Buddha. The thatched roof crackled like a small fire in a gust of wind, and behind Konwicki, mapping the darkness of the wall, were tiny points of lights, uncaulked places between the boards through which the day was showing; they lent the wall the illusion of depth, of being a vast sky mapped with stars, all arranged in a dwindling perspective so as to draw one's eyes toward a greater darkness beyond them. I began to feel daunted, out of my element, and I told myself again that this was the result of manipulation on Konwicki's part, that by intimating through denial some vague expertise, he was playing upon my fears; but this was no comfort. I tried to think of something to say that would pose a counterspell to the silent pall that was settling over me, I had a great faith in words, believing that their formal noise elegantly utilized could have the weight of truth no matter how insincere had been the impulse to speak, and so when words failed me, I

felt even more at sea. I looked away from Konwicki, gathering myself. The doorway framed a stretch of pale brown sand and sun-spattered water and curving palm trunks, and the brilliance of the scene was such a contrast to the gloom within, I imagined that these things comprised a single presence that was peering in at us like an eye at a keyhole, and that Konwicki and I were microscopic creatures dwelling inside the mechanism of a lock that separated dark and light.

The weight of the silence forced me to stand and squeezed me toward the door. "We haven't settled anything," I said, brushing off my trousers, making a bustling, casual business of retreat. "But I hope you understand that I don't need any aggravation. Neither does Odille. If you want to make peace, we're open to it." I stepped into the doorway. "See you around."

Once outside under the sun, breathing the salt air, I felt easier, confident. I had, I thought, handled things fairly well. But as I turned to head back to the house, I tripped over Ryan, who had reclaimed his place beside the door, sitting with his knees drawn up. I went sprawling, rolled over, intending to apologize. But Ryan didn't appear to have noticed me. He continued to sit there, staring at a patch of sand, fingers plucking at a fray on his cutoffs, and after getting to my feet, watching him for a second or two, I started walking, maintaining a brisk pace, feeling a cold spot between my shoulder blades that I imagined registered the pressure of a pair of baleful eyes.

That same night, following a bout of paranoid introspection, I dreamed that I went inside one of the pyramids, a structure not far from the statue of the snake-headed creature that I had encountered in earlier dreams. Leery about entering, watching for signs that would warn me off, I passed through a missing wall and climbed a stair that ended several hundred feet above in midair and was connected to a number of windowless cubicles, all of the same black stone. I considered exploring the cubicles, but when I put my hand to the door of one, I heard a woman's muffled voice alternately sobbing and spewing angry curses; I pictured a harpy within, some female monstrosity, and I withdrew my hand. On every side a maze of other stairways lifted around me, rising without apparent support like a monumental fantasy by Escher or Piranesi, reducing perspective to a shadowy puzzle, and I felt diminished in spirit by the enormity of the

place. Snakes lay motionless on the stairs, looking at a distance like cracks admitting to a bright coppery void; black spiders, invisible until they moved, scuttled away from my feet, and their filmy webs spanned between each step. From a point three-quarters of the way up, the desert appeared the color of dried blood, and set at regular intervals about the complex were five more colossal statues, each similar to the first in its repulsive anatomy, but sculpted in different poses; one crouching, one with its head thrown back, and so on. I couldn't help wondering if these six figures were related to the counters of Konwicki's game.

I had intended to go all the way to the top, but I grew uncomfortable with the isolation, the silence, and started back down. My progress was slowed by an attack of dizziness. I could still hear the woman crying, and the percussive effect of her sobs made me dizzy. The spaces beneath were swelling upward like black gas, and, afraid that I would fall, overcoming my nervousness concerning the cubicles, I flung open the door to one, thinking I would sit inside until my vertigo had passed. A fecal stink poured from the cubicle, and something moved in the darkness at the rear, startling me.

"Who's there?" called a man's voice.

There was something familiar about the voice, and I peered into the cubicle. A pale shape was slumped against the far wall.

"Come on out," I said.

The man shifted deeper into the corner. "Why are you here?"

"I'm dreaming all this," I said. "I don't have much choice."

A feeble, scratchy laugh. "That's what they all say."

I stepped inside, closing until I had clear sight of the man. For a moment I failed to recognize him, but then I realized it was Ryan — Ryan as he might have looked after a hard twenty years, his blond hair grayed and the youthful lines of his face dissolved into sagging flesh. The creases in his skin had filled in with grime and looked to be deep cuts. His clothes were in tatters. "Jesus, Ryan!" I said. "What happened?"

"I'm in jail." Another cracked laugh. "I have to stay put until. . . ."

"Till what?"

He shook his head.

I knelt beside him. "Where are we, Ryan?"

He giggled. "The endgame."

"What the hell's that mean?"



"The game," he said, "is not a game."

I waited for him to continue, but he had lost his train of thought. I repeated the question.

"The game is just a way of getting here. You've already done playing, and now you have to wait till all the moves have been made."

I asked him to explain why — if I'd done playing — moves were still to be made, and he replied by saying that a move wasn't a move until it had been made everywhere. "It's like this place," he said. "A place isn't really a place. One place leads to another, and that place leads to another yet, and on and on. There's nothing that's only itself." That thought seemed to sadden him, and he said, "Nothing."

The woman let out a piercing scream, and her curses echoed through the pyramid.

I tried to pull Ryan to his feet, thinking that there might be some more pleasant place for him to wait; he struck at my hands, a flurry of weak blows that did no damage, but caused me to release him.

"Leave me alone," he said. "I'm safe here."

"Safe from what?"

"From you," he answered. "The Master thinks he's the dangerous one, but I know it's you. He's made the wrong move. Sooner or later he'll see I'm right, and he'll try and stop it. But you can't stop it. The travelers have to come and go; the transitions have to. . . ." His speech became incoherent for a few seconds; then he snapped out of it. "Of course, there are no right moves. Even the winner pays a price once the game is done. But not to worry, Ray," he said with a flash of his old cockiness. "It'll hurt, but it'll be a much cheaper price than the one the Master has to pay. Or else you can always keep playing if you want to be noble and take the risk."

He lapsed into incoherence once again; I attempted to bring him to his senses, but all he would say was to repeat that "it" couldn't be stopped, "it" had to happen, and to ramble on about "exchanges, necessary transitions." Giving up on him, I left the cubicle and went out onto the sand. The sun was low, its violet-white disk partially down on the horizon, and the shadows had grown indistinct. I strolled about the complex, feeling for the first time at ease among the buildings; I was comfortable even in proximity to the snake-headed statue. I stepped back from it, admiring its needle teeth and flat skull, all its obscene proportions, and although I felt as before a sense of resonant identity with it, on this occasion I was not

frightened by the feeling, but rather was pleased. Indeed, I found the entire landscape soothing. The snakes, the crabs scuttling down the sanguine faces of the dunes, the black silence of the complex . . . all this had a bleak majesty and seemed the product of a pure aesthetic.

On waking and remembering the dream, however, I was more disturbed by my acceptance of that bizarre landscape than I had been by my fear of it. It was still dark, and Odille was asleep beside me. I eased out of bed, pulled on jeans and a shirt, and went into the patio. The edges of the tile roof framed a rectangle of stars and dark blue sky, with the crowns of palms showing half in silhouette, the ragged fronds throwing back pale green shines from the lights of the house next door. I dropped onto a lawn chair and lay back, trying to settle my thoughts. After a few minutes I heard the whisper of Odille's sandals on the concrete; she had thrown on a bathrobe, and her hair was in disarray, loose about her shoulders. She sat opposite me, put a hand on my knee, and asked what was wrong.

I had previously told her that I'd been having bad dreams, but had not been specific; now, though, I told her the entire story — the game, the feelings I'd had, the dreams, and my meeting with Konwicki. Once I had done, she lowered her head, fingering the hem of her robe, and after a pause she asked, "What are you worried about? The game . . . that it's real?"

I was ashamed to admit it.

"That's ridiculous!" she said. "You can't believe that."

"It's just the dreams . . . and Ryan. I mean, what's the matter with him?"

She made a noise of disgust. "He's weak. Carl's found a way to undermine him with drugs or something. That's all."

We were silent for several seconds; a palm frond scraped the roof, and the surf was a distant hiss.

"I knew something was bothering you," she said. "But. . . ." She got to her feet, walked a couple of paces off, and stood with her arms folded. "Carl's getting to you. I wouldn't have thought it possible." She sighed, jammed her hands in the pocket of the robe. "I'm going to see him."

"The hell you are!"

"I am! And if *he* believes there's anything to the game, I'll find out about it." I started to object, but she talked over me. "You aren't worried about me, are you? About my going back to him?"

"I guess not."

"That doesn't sound like a vote of confidence." She knelt beside

my chair. "Don't you understand how much I hate him?"

"I never understood why you were with him in the first place."

"I was vulnerable. He took advantage of my confusion. He confused me even more. He violated my trust; he weakened me. If I could, I'd . . ." She drew a deep breath, let it out slowly. "Don't tell me you haven't ever done anything that you knew was bad for you even when you were doing it."

"No," I said, surprised by her vehemence. "I can't tell you that." I stroked her hair. "What did he do to you?"

Her face worked, suppressing emotion. "The same sort of thing he's trying to do to you . . . except, I didn't have anybody to tell me what was going on. Listen! Nothing's going to happen. I'm just going to talk to him. He'll lie, but I know when he's lying. I'll be able to tell whether he's concerned for himself or looking for a way to hurt you. And that'll put your mind at ease."

"It's not necessary."

"Yes, it is!" She put her arms around my neck. "I want you to get past this so I can have your undivided attention."

There was an edge to her intensity, a hectic brightness in her eyes, that quieted my objections, and later that night when she said she loved me, I believed her for the first time.

Two nights later as we sat at dinner in a small restaurant, a one-room place of stucco and thatch lit by candles, Odille told me that she had spoken with Konwicki. "You don't have to be concerned about the game," she said. "Carl's only trying to unnerve you." She had a forkful of rice, chewed. "I told him all about your dreams . . . everything. You should have seen him. He was like a starving man who'd been handed a steak. He said, Yes, yes, it was the same for him. Dreams, odd intuitions. Then I described your last dream, the one with Ryan, and what he'd said about Carl's making the wrong move. He loved that. He said, Yes, that was true. And he didn't know how to stop it from happening. After that, he offered an apology for everything that had happened between us. He said the game had changed him, that he could see now what a reprehensible sort he'd been."

"A reprehensible sort?" I said. "Were those his words?"

"I believe so."

"Reprehensible . . . shit!" I stared at her over the rim of my coffee cup. "It sounds to me like he's corroborating the dreams. Why else would

he admit that he'd made a bad move?"

"Because," said Odille, "he knows if he were to deny it, he'd have no way of affecting you. But now, claiming that it's all true, especially the part about him possibly losing, he has an excuse to talk to you, to play with your mind. He can pretend to be your ally. You watch. He'll come to see you. He'll try to align himself with you. He'll have a plan that'll involve the two of you working together to save each other from the game . . . its perils. Then he'll start manipulating." She had another bite, swallowed. "He thought he was fooling me, but he was transparent."

"Are you sure about all this?"

"Of course. Carl's a greedy little man who thinks he's smarter than the rest of the world. He can't imagine that anyone could see through him. If there was anything to the game, he never would have told me." She took my hand. "Just wait. Watch what happens. You'll see I'm right."

Odille's reassurances had not convinced me of the fecklessness of my fears. Recalling Konwicki's statement that familiarity with one's counter was important, I set out to reinhabit the feelings I'd had while playing, to recall the moves that had been made. It was not hard to recapture those feelings; they returned to me every night in dreams. But the moves were a different matter. Other than the first, I could remember only the last two: one in which all four figures had been places in close proximity, and another in which the figure of the infant had been placed in a zone adjoining that of the dwarf. I asked Odille what she could recall about the counters from working on the translation, and she said that all she knew was what Konwicki had told her.

"He used to joke with me about them," she said. "He identified himself with the warrior, and he said my counter was the female ... the one you moved during the game. He described her to me. A real maniac, a terrible creature. Sluttish, foul-mouthed, vile. She was always throwing tantrums. Physically abusive."

"Maybe he was trying to demean you by describing her that way."

"I'm sure he was. But once he did show me some of the translation he'd done about her, and it looked authentic."

"What were they . . . the counters? Did he ever tell you that?"

"Archetypes," she said. "Mayan archetypes, Spirit forms . . . that was the term he used. I'm not sure what that meant. Whoever made the figures, whoever assigned them their characters, had a warped idea of human

potential. All the characters were repellent in some way. . . . I remember that much. But when he told me all that, I was trying to pull away from him, and I didn't pay much attention."

A week went by, and I made no further progress. I was spinning my wheels, wasting myself in futile effort. Then I took stock of the situation, and suddenly all my paranoia seemed ludicrous. That I could have even half-believed I had been possessed by a Mayan spirit in the shape of a dwarf was evidence of severe mental slippage, and it was time to get a grip. The dreams must have some connection to the abuses I had suffered during the past few years, I thought, and to be this much of a fool for love was debasing, particularly in the face of the abuses I met with every day in Livingston. Malnutrition, tyranny, ignorance. I determined that I was going to take a hard line with my psyche. If I had dreams, so what? Sooner or later they would run their course. And I also determined to grant Odille's wish, to give her my undivided attention; I realised that while I hadn't been neglecting her, neither had I been utilizing the resources of the relationship as a lover should. Things were changing between us in a direction that I would never have predicted, and I owed it to her, to myself, to see where that would lead.

Our lives were calm for the next couple of weeks. The dreams continued, but I refused to let them upset me. Odille and I fell into the habit of taking twilight walks along the beach, and one evening after a storm, with dark blue ridges of cloud pressing down upon a smear of buttermilk yellow on the horizon, we walked out to the point beyond the Café Pluto, a hook of land bearing a few palms whose crowns showed against the last of sunset like feathered headdresses. Nearby stretches of cobalt water merged with the purplish slate farther out, and there were so many small waves, it looked as if the sea were moving in every direction at once. We sat on a boulder at the end of the point, watching the light fade in the west, and after a minute, Odille asked if I had ever been to Paris.

"A long time ago," I said.

"What did you think?"

"It was the winter," I said. "I didn't see too much. I had no money, and I was staying in a house that belonged to this old lady named Bunny. She was straight out of a Tennessee Williams play. She'd been Lawrence Durrell's lover . . . or maybe it wasn't Durrell. Somebody famous, anyway. She

was an invalid, and the house was a mess. Cat shit everywhere. There was a crazy Romanian who was printing an anarchist newsletter in the basement. And Bunny's kids, they were true degenerates. Her fifteen-year-old raped the maid. The twenty-year-old was dealing smack. Bunny just lay around, and I ended up having to take care of her."

"God, you've lived!" said Odille, and we both laughed.

I put an arm around her. "Are you homesick?"

"Not so much . . . a little." She leaned into me. "I was just wondering how you'd like Paris."

We had talked about the future in only the most general of terms, but I felt comfortable now considering a future with her, and that surprised me, because even though I was happier than I'd been in a very long time, I had also been nervous about formalizing the relationship.

"I suppose we're going to have to leave here eventually," I said.

She looked up at me. "Yes."

"It doesn't matter to me where we go. I don't have to be any particular place to do my work."

"I know," she said. "That's your greatest virtue."

"Is that so?" I kissed her, the kiss grew long, and we lay back on the boulder. I touched her breasts. In the darkness the whites of her eyes were aglow; her breath was sweet and frail. Waves slapped at the rock. Finally I turned onto my back, pillowed my head on my hands. Icy stars made simple patterns in the sky, and it seemed to me at the moment that everything in the world had that same simplicity.

"Someday," Odille said after a long silence, "I'd like to go back to Paris . . . just to see my friends again."

"Want me to go with you?"

She was silent for a bit; then she sat up and stared out to sea. I had asked the question glibly, thinking I knew the answer, yet now I was afraid that I'd misread her. At last she said, "You wouldn't like it. Americans don't like Parisians."

"The way I hear it, it's mutual," I said, relieved. "But there are exceptions."

"I guess so." She glanced down at me and smiled. "Anyway, we don't have to stay in Paris. We could come to the States. I wouldn't mind that." She tipped her head to the side. "You look puzzled."

"I wasn't sure we'd get around to talking about this. And even if

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“The game’s a conduit,” he said. “A means of transport to another world, another plane. . .”

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we did, I thought it would be awkward.”

“So did I for a while. But then I realized we were past awkwardness.” With both hands, she lifted the heft of her hair and pushed it back behind her head. “Sometimes I’ve tried to imagine myself without you. I can do it. I can picture myself living a life, being with someone else. All that. But then I realize how artificial that was . . . that kind of self-examination. It was as if I were wishing for that prospect, because I was afraid of you. To end doubt, or to learn whether my doubts were real, all I had to do was stop thinking about them. Just give in to the moment. That was easier said than done, I thought. But then I tried it, and it *was* easy.” She ran a hand along my arm. “You did it, too. I could tell when you stopped.”

“Could you, now?”

“Don’t you believe me?”

Before I could answer, there was a crunching in the brush behind us, and two figures emerged from shadows about thirty feet away. It took me a second to identify them against the dark backdrop — Konwicki, with Ryan hanging at his shoulder. I stood, wary, and Odille came to her knees. “What the fuck are you doing?” I asked them. “Tracking us?”

“I have to talk with you,” said Konwicki. “About the game.”

“Some other time, man.” I took Odille’s arm and began steering her back along the point, giving Konwicki and Ryan a wide berth, but keeping an eye on them.

“Listen,” said Konwicki, coming after us. “I’m not after mucking you about. We’re in serious trouble.” I kept walking, and he grabbed my shoulder, spun me around. “I’ve been having dreams, too. They’re different from yours. But they’re indicators all the same.”

His face betrayed anxiety, but I wasn’t buying the act. I shoved him back. “Keep your hands off me!”

“The game’s a conduit,” he said as we walked away. “A means of transport to another world, another plane . . . something. And to another form as well.” He caught up with me, blocked our path; Ryan scuttled behind him. “I don’t know how the Mayans discovered it, but it was a major

influence on the architecture, on every facet of their culture. The ritual cruelties of their religion, the —"

"Get out of my way." I was cold inside — a sign that I was preparing for violence. My senses had grown acute. The slop of the waves, Konwicki's breathing, the leaves rustling — all were sharp and distinct. Ryan's pale face, peering from behind Konwicki, seemed as bright as a star.

"You're a fool if you don't listen to me," Konwicki said. "The game we played was real. I admit I wouldn't be here if I didn't think I was in danger, but there's —"

"You made the wrong move, that it?" I said.

"Yes," said Konwicki. "I didn't know it at the time. I didn't know we were actually playing. And later, after I realized something strange was happening, I didn't see the mistake I'd made." He wagged both hands as if dismissing all that. "We've got an option, man . . . I think. The winner can keep the game going for one more move at least. It'll be a risk, but a relatively minor one." He looked as if he were about to grab me in frustration, doing a fine imitation of a desperate man. "That way we have a chance of figuring out what else we can do."

"I'm not one of your goddamn chumps!" I said. "I know Odille told you about my dream. You're trying to use it against me."

"Yes, yes, you're right," he said. "I was using it. I wanted to fuck with you. I admit it. But after Odille talked to me, I began thinking about some of the things she'd told me. And some of the things you'd said, too."

I spat on the sand. "Jesus!"

"I'm telling the truth. I promise you!" he said. "After I talked to her. I had another look at the game . . . at the papers. Some of the things she'd told me gave me new insights into the translation." His words came in a rush. "You see, I believed that the figures — the dwarf, the warrior — that they were the entities involved. I thought they were conveyances that carried you to the pyramids. And they are. One of us was going to be transported. That much was certain. I thought it would be me, but it's not. . . . It's you. And I'd overlooked the obvious." A dismayed laugh. "It's a matter of elementary physics. For every action there's a reaction."

He paused for breath, and, having heard enough, I said, "Odille told me you'd come up with something clever. Guess she was wrong about that."

I started to push past him, but he shoved me back. "For God's sake, will you listen?"



"I'm going to tell you once more," I said. "Keep your hands off me."

"That's right, you stupid clot!" he said. "Just go home and bugger you stupid whore and don't worry about a bloody thing!"

"Such talk," I said; my arms had begun to tremble.

"Let's just go!" Odille pulled at me, and I allowed myself to be hauled along; but Konwicki planted a hand on my chest, bringing me up short.

"I'm trying to save your sodding life, you ass!" he said. "Are you going to listen to me, or. . . ." He was, judging from his disdainful expression, about to deliver some further pomposity.

"No," I said, and nailed him in the stomach, not wanting to hurt my hand. He caved in, went to his knees, then rolled up into a fetal position, the wind knocked out of him. Ryan darted toward me, then retreated into the shadows; a second later I heard him running off through the bushes.

It had been years since I'd hit anyone, and I was ashamed of myself; Konwicki had been no threat. I dropped to my knees beside him, counseled him to take shallow breaths, and once he had recovered somewhat, I tried to help him up. He pushed my hands away and fixed me with a hateful stare.

"Right, you bastard!" he said. "I warned you, but that's all right. You'll have to take what comes now."

After that night on the point, I concluded that Livingston had lost its charm; I wanted to avoid further conflicts, and I was certain more would arise. Odille was in accord with this, and we planned to leave as soon as I could find someone responsible to take over the Spanish doctor's house. We decided to settle in Panajachel near Lake Atitlán until I finished my current writing project, and then visit New York city en route to Paris; almost without acknowledging it, we had made an oblique, understated commitment to each other, one that by contrast to our pasts and the instability around us was a model of rigor. Perhaps our relationship had begun as an accommodation, a shelter from the heavy weather of our lives, but against all odds, something more had developed; although I wasn't ready to admit it to her, unwilling to risk a total involvement, I had fallen in love with Odille. It wasn't any one instance or event that had brought this home to me, but rather a slowly growing awareness of my reactions to her. I had begun to focus more and more upon her, to treasure images of her. To savor all the days. And yet I detected in myself a residue

of tension, one I also detected in her, and this was evidence that we were afraid of the obsessive bonding that had occurred, and were preparing for disappointment, obeying the conditioning of our pasts.

Ten days passed, and I hadn't found anyone to take the house. I wrote to the Spanish doctors, telling them that an emergency had come up, that I had to leave and wanted to delegate my responsibilities to the local priest, who had become something of a friend, and who — aside from his clerical duties — maintained a small museum that displayed some Mayan artifacts of indifferent value. I began to pack my papers in anticipation of their response. Early one evening I went to the telegraph office to call my agent in the States and tell her about the move, to see if she had money for me. The office was a low building of yellow stucco next to the generator that provided the village's power, and was manned by a harried-looking clerk who was arguing with an Indian family, and was guarded by a soldier wearing camouflage gear and carrying a machine gun. The phones lined the rear wall of the office, and, choosing the one farthest from the argument, I put in the call. Five minutes later I heard my agent's voice through a hiss of static, and after we had taken care of business, I asked what was new in the big city.

"The usual," she said. "Boring parties and editors playing musical chairs. You're better off down there . . . as long as you're working. *Are you working?*"

"Don't worry," I said.

My agent let some dead time accumulate, then said, "I guess I should tell you this, Ray. You're going to find out sooner or later."

"What's that?"

"Karen had her baby."

For an instant I felt strangely light, free of some restraint. "I didn't think she was due this soon."

"There were complications. But she's all right. So's the baby. It's a boy. It's really cute, Ray. A little doll. It just lies there and squeaks."

I let out a nasty laugh. "Just like its mama."

"I thought you went down there to let go of her. You don't sound like you're letting go."

"Must be the connection." I stared at the pocked, grimy wall, seeing nothing.

Another pause. "What're you working on, Ray?"

"You'll see it soon," I said. "Look, I've got to go."

"I didn't mean to upset you."

"I'm not upset. I'll call you in a couple of weeks, O.K.?"

I walked outside, cut down onto the beach. Dusk had given way to darkness, and the jungled shore was picked out by shanty lights; there was also a scattering of lights on the hills lifting behind the village, showing the location of small farms and plantations. The moon, almost full, had risen to shine through a notch between the hills, paving the chop of the water close to shore with silvery glitter; but threatening clouds and dark brooms of rain were visible farther out — a storm would be hitting the coast within a matter of minutes. I was angry as I walked, but my anger was undirected. Karen was no longer an object of hatred, merely a catalyst that opened me to violent emotion, and I realized that part of the reason she had maintained a hold over me for so long was due, not to any real feeling, but to my romantic nature, my stubborn denial that the light in the heart could be snuffed out. I had hung on to the belief that — despite Karen's betrayal — the good, strong core of my feelings would last; now I was forced to face the fact that they were dead, and that made me angry and caused me to doubt everything I felt for Odille.

A voice called to me as I was passing a stand of palmettos. I ignored it, but the voice continued to call, and I whirled around to see Ryan running down the beach, his blond hair flying, dressed in the cutoffs and soiled shirt that had become his uniform. He staggered to a halt a few feet away, gasping.

"What do you want?" I asked.

He held up a hand, trying to catch his breath. "Gotta talk to you," he managed. He looked alien to me, a pale little twist of a creature, and I felt vastly superior. Stronger, more intelligent. The fierceness of the loathing that fueled these feelings didn't strike me as unusual.

"Talk about what?" I said.

"Odille . . . you have to break it off with her."

"You jealous, Ryan?"

"Konwicki. . . ."

"Fuck Konwicki!" I gave Ryan a shove that sent him reeling backward, catching at the air with his hands. "If he's got a problem, tell him to come talk to me himself."

"You have to stop seeing her," said Ryan defiantly. He slipped a hand

beneath his shirtfront as if soothing a stomachache, and kept his eyes lowered. "I'm warning you. . . . Bad things are going to happen if you don't."

"Goodness me, Ryan," I said, taking a little walk around him, examining him contemptuously, as if he were an unsightly objet d'art. "I wonder what they could be."

Ryan's chin quivered. "He's . . . he's. . . ."

"C'mon, man! Spit it out!" I said. "Has he been doing bad things to you? He must have been doing something nasty, mighty bad to turn you into such a twitchy little toad. Is it drugs? Is he feeding you bad drugs, or. . . ."

Anger came boiling out of him. "Don't talk to me like that!"

I knew at that moment that Ryan had a weapon. The way he kept shifting his right hand under his shirt as if adjusting his grip, keeping his weight back on his heels, balanced, ready to strike. And I wanted him to strike.

"I got it," I said. "Konwicki's into boys now. That's it, right? And you're his boy! That explains why I've never seen you with a girl."

"Stop it!" He set himself, the muscles of his right forearm flexing.

"What's it like with him, man? He make your little doggy sit up and beg?"

"You better stop!"

"Does he make a lot of noise, Ryan?" I laughed, and the laugh startled me, sounding too guttural to be my own. "Or is he the strong, silent type?"

With a shout, he pulled a knife from beneath his shirt and slashed at me. I caught his wrist, gave it a sharp twist. He cried out, the knife fell to the sand, and he backed away, cradling his wrist, his expression shifting between panic and anguish. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry. He told me I had to. . . ." Then he broke into a stumbling run and went crashing through the palmettos. I scooped up the knife and began to hunt him. That was how it seemed. A hunt. One in which I was expert. I've never been much of an athlete, yet that night I ran easily, with short, chopping strides that carried me in a zigzagging path among the palmettos. I kept pace with Ryan, running off to his left and a little behind, intending to harry him until he dropped. He glanced back over his shoulder, saw me, and ran faster, frantically calling out to Konwicki.

On hearing that, I slowed my pursuit. It was Konwicki I really wanted, and since Ryan had been his messenger, it was likely that he was now going to see him. And yet we were heading away from the beach, away

from Konwicki's house. I decided to trust my instincts. If Konwicki had somehow convinced Ryan to kill me — and I thought that must be the case, that he'd hoped to evade the judgment of the game by eliminating me — after the deed, he would have wanted Ryan to meet him somewhere out of the way. I dropped back a bit, letting Ryan think he had lost me, keeping track of him by ear, picking out the sound of his passage through the foliage from the noises of insects and frogs and wind. We were moving onto the slope of one of the hills behind the village, and despite the uphill path, I was still running easily, enjoying myself. The musky scents of the vegetation were as cloying as perfume; clouds flowing across the moon, driven by a gusting wind, made the world go alternately dark and bright with an erratic rhythm that added to my excitement. I exulted in the turbulent weather, in my strength, and I threw the knife into the brush, knowing that I wasn't going to need it.

As I passed through a banana grove, a flickering yellow light penetrated the bushes to my left from one of the farmhouses. The wind was rapidly gaining in force, tattering the banana leaves, lifting them high like the feathery legs of giant insects, and something about their articulated shapes fluttering in a sudden wash of moonlight made me uneasy. I began to have an inconstant feeling in my flesh, a dull vibration that nauseated me; I tried to push it aside, to concentrate on the running, but it persisted. I estimated that I must be a quarter of the way up the hill, and I could hear Ryan jogging along almost parallel to me. He had stopped calling out to Konwicki, but now and then he would cry out, perhaps because of the pain in his wrist. I was having some pain myself. Twinges in my joints, in my bones. Growing sharper by the moment. And there was something wrong with my eyes. Every object had a halo, the veins of leaves glowed an iridescent green, and overhead I could see dozens of filmy layers between the clouds and the earth, drifting, swirling, coalescing. I shook my head, trying to clear my vision, but if anything, it grew worse. The halos had congealed into auras of a dozen different colors; hot spots of molten scarlet and luminous blue were insects crawling in the dirt. The pain kept growing worse, too. The twinges became jolts of agony shooting through my limbs, and with the onset of each, I staggered, unable to stay on course. Then a tremendous pain in my chest sent me to all fours, my eyes squeezed shut; panting. I tried to stand, and in doing so, caught sight of my left hand — gnarled, lumpy fingers thick as sausages, clawing at rusty

orange sand, lengthening and blackening. A fresh surge of pain knocked me down, and I twisted about and gouged at the earth for what seemed a very long time. Rain started to fall, and another burst of pain dredged up a bass scream from my chest that merged with the wind, like the massive *Om* of a foghorn wedded to a howl. One instant I felt I was splitting in half, the next that I was growing huge and heavy. I receded from the storm and the world, dwindling to a point within myself, and from that moment on I was incapable of action, only of mute and horrified observation as another "I" took control of my thoughts, one whose judgments were funded by an anger far more potent and implacable than my own.

I lashed out with my left arm, clutched something thin and hard, tore at it; the next second a banana tree fell across my chest. But the pain was diminishing rapidly, and after it had passed, rather than feeling exhausted, I felt renewed. I climbed to my feet and looked out over the treetops. The storm that during transition had seemed so chaotic and powerful now seemed inconsequential, hardly worth my notice. Lightning scratched red forking lines down the sky; inky clouds rushed overhead. A flickering nimbus of bluish white overlaid the jungle, and beneath it, the lights of the houses ranging the hill were almost too dim to make out. I could find no sign of the defeated. Frustrated, I moved toward the nearest house — a structure with board walls and a roof of corrugated metal — knocking away branches, pushing masses of foliage aside, my hair whipped into my eyes by the wind. When I reached the house, I stood gazing down at the roof, trying to sense the occupants. The energy flows binding the metal, stitchings of coruscant lines and dazzles, could not hide the puny lives within: shifting clots of heat and color. My quarry was not there, but in a fury I swung my arm and tore a long rip in the roof, delighted by the shriek of the tortured metal. Dark frightened faces stared at me through the rip, then vanished. A moment later I spotted them running out the door and into the jungle, becoming streaks of red beneath the ghostly luminescence of the leaves. I would have enjoyed pursuing them, but my time was limited, and I was concerned that the completion of my task would be hampered by the victor — lodged like a stone in my brain — whose pitiful morality was a nagging irritant. I wondered at his motives for entering the contest. Surely he must have known what was at stake. There is no morality in this darkness.

I comforted myself with the thought that before too long the victor

would have his due, unless — and I thought this unlikely — he chose to renew the challenge; and I pressed on through the jungle. Something ran across my path — an animal of some sort. It swerved aside, but before it could escape, I grazed it with a claw, tearing its belly and flipping it into the air. The kill improved my temper. I had never relished employing my license here. The weak strains of life are barely a music, and the walls that hold back death are tissue-thin. But I was pleased to see the blood jet forth. I watched the animal's essence disperse, misting upward in pale threads to rejoin the Great Cloud of Being, and then continued on my way.

At the crest of the hill, I paused and gazed back down the slope. From this vantage the landscape of that soft female world seemed transformed, infused with new strength. Great smoking clouds streamed from the seas and the jungle pitched and tossed as if troubled by my sight. The souls of trees were thin gold wires stretched to breaking. The thunder was a power, the lightning a name. I stood attuning myself to the night, absorbing its black subtleties and cold meanings, and thus strengthened, restored to the fullness of purpose, I went along the crest, searching the darkness for the defeated, listening among the whispers of the dead for the sound of one soon to die, for that telltale dullness and sonority. At last I heard him venting his rage against one of the alternates in a house a third of the way down the hill. His obvious lack of preparation dismayed me, and once again I felt less than enthusiastic about my duty. It would be a mercy to end these intermittent rituals of violence and let the brood come as an army to urge on this feeble race to the next plane.

The house was a glowing patch in the midst of a toiling darkness, and was made of sapling poles and thatch; orange light striped the gaps between the poles and leaked from beneath the door. I called to the defeated. The angry conversation within was broken off, but no one came out. Perhaps, I thought, he had mistaken my call for an element of the storm. I called again, a demanding scream that outvoiced the thunder. Still he remained within. This was intolerable! Now I would be forced to instruct him. I ripped aside the poles at the front of the house, creating a gaping hole through which I saw two figures shrinking back against the rear wall. I held out my hand in invitation, but as the alternate collapsed to the floor, the defeated went scuttling about like a frightened crab, running into the table, the chairs. Disgusted, I reached in and picked him up. I

lifted him high, looked into his terrified face. He struggled, prying at my claws, kicking, squealing his fear.

"Why do you struggle?" I asked. "Your life is an exhausted breath, the failure of an enervated creation. You are food with a flicker of intelligence. True power is beyond you, and the knowledge of pain is your most refined sensibility." Of course, he did not understand; my speech must have seemed to him like a tide roaring out from a cave. But to illustrate the point, I traced a line of blood across his ribs, being careful not to cut too deeply. "Your ideas are all wrong," I told him. "Your concept of beauty, a gross mutation; your insipid notions of good and evil, an insult to their fathering principles." Once again I made him bleed, tracing the second line of instruction, slitting the skin of his stomach with such precision that it parted in neat flaps, yet the sac within was left intact. "Evil is as impersonal as mathematics. That its agencies derive pleasure from carrying out its charge is meaningless. Its trappings, its gauds and hellish forms, are nuance, not essence. Evil is the pure function of the universe, the machine of stars and darkness that carries us everywhere." At the third line, I saw in his face the first lights of understanding, and in his shrieks I detected a music that reflected the incisiveness of my as yet incomplete design. His eyes were distended, bloody spittle clung to his lips and beard, and there was a new eagerness in his expression; he would — had he been able to muster coherent thought — have interpreted this eagerness as a lust for death, yet I doubted he would be aware that to feel such a lust was the signature of a profound lesson learned. I thought, however, that once we returned to the desert, once I had time to complete the design, our lessons would go more quickly. I traced a fourth line. His body spasmed, flopping bonelessly, but he did not lose consciousness, and I admired his stamina, envied him the small purity of his purpose. The bond that held me in that place was weakening, and I grasped him more tightly, squeezing a trickle of darkness from his mouth. "You and I," I said, slicing the skin over his breastbone, "are gears of the machine. Together we interlock and turn, causing an increment of movement, a miniscule resolution of potential." With the barest flick, I laid open one of his cheeks, and he responded with a high, quavering wail that went on and on as if I had opened a valve. Inside him, released some pressure that issued forth with a celebratory keening. Beneath the wash of blood, I had a glimpse of white. "I can see to your bone," I said. "The stalk of your being. I am going to pare you down



to your essential things, both of flesh and knowledge. And when we return to the temples, you will have clear sight of them, of their meaning. They, too, are part of the machine." His head lolled back; his mouth went slack, and his eyes — they appeared to have gone dark — rolled up to fix on mine. It was as if he had decided to take his ease and bleed and study his tormentor, insulated from pain and fear. Perhaps he thought the worst was over. I laughed at that, and the storm of my laughter merged with the wind and all the tearing night, making him stiffen. I bent my head close to him, breathed a black breath to keep him calm during the transition, and whispered, "Soon you will know everything."

**T**HAT IS a mere approximation of what I remember, an overformal and inadequate rendering of an experience that seems with the passage of time to grow ever more untranslatable. Trapped by the limitations of language, I can only hint at the sense of alienness that had pervaded me, at the compulsions of the thing I believed I had become. I woke on the beach before dawn not far from Konwicki's house, and I thought that after the possession — or the transformation, or whatever it had been — had ended, in the resultant delirium, I must have wandered down from the hillside and passed out. No other possibility offered itself. My muscles still ached from the experience, and my memories were powerful and individual and sickening. I remembered how it felt to have the strength to tear iron like rotten cloth; I remembered a cold disdain for a world I now embraced in gratitude and relief; I remembered the sight of a black hand wicked with curved talons closing around Konwicki and lifting him high; I remembered intelligence without sentiment, hatred without passion; I remembered a thousand wars in the spirit that I had never fought; I remembered killing a hundred brothers for the right to survive; I remembered a silence that caused pain; I remembered thoughts like knives, a wind like religion, a brilliance like fear, I remembered things for which I had no words. Things that made me tremble.

But as the sun brought light into the world, light brought doubt into my mind and caused the memories to diminish in importance. Their very sharpness was a reason to doubt them; memories, I believed, should be fragmentary, chaotic, and these — despite their untranslatable essence — were a poignant, almost physical, weight inside my head. Their vividness

seemed a stamp of fraudulence, of the manufactured, and thus my problems with interpreting what had happened became complex and confusing. How much, for instance, had Odille known? Had she, out of hatred for Konwicki, manipulated me? Had she known more than she had said, trying to encourage a deadly confrontation? And if so, what sort of confrontation was she trying to encourage? And what about coincidence? The coincidence of so many elements of those days and the dreams and the game. Was it really coincidence, or could what seemed coincidental have been a matter of selective memory? And Konwicki . . . had he been honest with me that night on the point, or had he, too, been engaged in manipulation? Could Odille's desertion have left him more bereft than he had allowed, and was that a significant motivation? I wished I had let him finish speaking, that I had learned what he meant by the phrase "for every action there's a reaction." Was that merely another coincidence, or did it refer to an exchange of travelers between this world and that desert hell? And most pertinent, had my deep-seated anger against an old lover been a sufficiently powerful poison to cause me to imagine an unimaginable horror, to erect an insane rationalization for a crime of passion? Or had anger been the key that opened both Konwicki and me to the forces of the game? Each potential answer to any of these questions cast a new light upon the rest, and therefore to determine an ultimate answer became a problem rather like trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces were constantly changing shape.

The sun had cleared the horizon, shining palely through thin gray clouds; clumps of seaweed littered the beach, looking at a distance like bodies washed up by the surf, and heaps of foam like dirty soapsuds demarked the tidal margin. My head felt packed with cotton, and I couldn't think. Then I was struck by an illumination, a hope. Maybe none of it had happened. A psychotic episode of some kind. I went stumbling through the mucky sand toward Konwicki's place, growing more and more certain that I would find him there. And when I burst into the darkened shack, I saw someone asleep on an air mattress against the wall, a head with brown hair protruding from beneath a blanket.

"Konwicki!" I said, elated.

The head turned toward me. A tanned teenage girl propped herself on an elbow, the blanket slipping from her breasts; she rubbed her eyes, pouted, and said grouchyly, "Who're you?"

The air in the room stank, heavy with the sourness of sexual activity and marijuana. I couldn't tell if the girl was pretty; her environment suppressed even the idea of prettiness. "Where's Konwicki?" I asked.

"You a friend of Carl's?"

"Yeah, we're soul mates." Being a wiseass helped stifle my anxiety.

The girl noticed her exposure, covered herself.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"I dunno." She slumped back down. "He went somewhere with Ryan last night. He'll probably be back soon." She shaded her eyes, peered into the thin light. "What's it like out there? Still drizzling?"

"No," I said dully.

The girl shook her hair back from her eyes. "I think I'll catch a swim."

I stood looking down at the cardboard box that contained the Mayan figurines.

"That means I'd like to put on my suit," said the girl.

"Oh . . . right. Sorry." I started out the door.

"After I'm dressed," said the girl, "you can wait here if you want. Carl's real free with his place."

I stood outside, uncertain what to do. While I was considering my options, the girl came out the door, wearing a red bikini; she waved and walked toward the water's edge. I stared in through the door at the cardboard box. Konwicki would not be returning, I realized, and the answer to all my questions might lie in that box. I checked to make sure that the girl wouldn't be a problem — she was splashing through the shallows — and darted inside. I picked up the box, then remembered the papers; I stuffed as many of them as possible in among the figurines, stuck some more under my arm, and went jogging along the shore toward home.

These were the facts, then. Konwicki was missing. The police were indifferent to the matter. Gringos were prone to make unannounced exits of this sort, they said. Likely he had gotten a girl in trouble. Ryan had been found on the hill, incapable of rational speech, his wrist broken; I saw him once before he was flown home under sedation, and he looked very like the Ryan of my dream. Drugs, said the local doctor. An Indian family with a small farm claimed that a demon had torn a hole in their roof and chased them through the jungle; but the sightings of demons was commonplace among the hill people, and their testimony was disregarded, the hole in

the roof chalked up to storm damage — a ceiba tree had fallen onto it. A deer had been found disemboweled in the jungle, but the wound could have been made by a machete. A shack had been destroyed, apparently by the wind. As the days passed and the memories of that night grew faint, I came to see this combination of facts as an indictment against myself. It was conceivable that in chasing Ryan, I had frightened an Indian family who had already been terrified by a tree crashing down upon their roof, and that in my rage, a rage funded by the bizarre materials of Konwicky's game, I had erected a delusionary system to deny my participation in a violent act. Having this conclusion, I became desperate to prove it wrong. I refused to accept that I was a murderer, and I pored over Konwicky's notes, trying to legitimize the game. I discovered what he had meant by saying that the game could be prolonged; according to his notes, the winner could choose to continue alone for one more move, and thereby negate the penalties that accrued to both winner and loser . . . though why anyone would choose this option was beyond me. Perhaps the Mayans ranked their priorities differently from those of our culture, and personal survival was not high among them. The fact that Konwicky had not told me that I, the winner, would save him and risk myself by continuing seemed to testify that he was been trying to trick me into going on. However, that wasn't sufficient proof. Even if he had not given the game any credence, he might — as Odille had suggested — have said the exact same thing in order to gain a hold on me. The events of that night lay on an edge between the rational and the irrational, and the problem of which interpretation to place upon them was in the end a matter of personal choice.

Yet I was obsessed with finding a solution, and for the next month I pursued the question. I no longer had dreams of the pyramids and the desert, but I had other dreams in which I saw Konwicky's tormented face. From these dreams I would wake covered with sweat, and I would go into my study and spend the remaining hours of the night staring at the four counters that had been employed in the game: the dwarf, the warrior, the woman, the infant. I grew distracted. My thoughts would for a time be gleefully manic, sharp, and then would become muzzy and vague. I was afflicted by the smell of blood; I had fevers, aural hallucinations of roaring and screams. And I fell into a deep depression, as deep as the one that had owned me in New York, unable to disprove to my own satisfaction the notion that I had killed a man.

Throughout this period, Odille was loving and supportive, exhausting herself on my behalf, and during moments of clarity, I realized how fortunate I was to have her, how much I had come to love her. It was this realization that began to pull me out of my depression . . . that, and the further realization that she was beginning to fray under the pressures of dealing with my breakdown. Over the span of a week, she grew sullen and short-tempered. I would find her pacing, agitated, and when I would try to console her, she would often as not react with hostility. Usually I was able to break through to her, to bring her back to normalcy. Then one night, returning from the corner store, where I had gone to buy olive oil, matches, some other things for the kitchen, as I came into the living room, I heard Odille out on the patio, sobbing, cursing, her voice thickened like a drunkard's. It was the voice I'd heard in my dream, coming from one of the cubicles in the pyramid. I stopped in my tracks, and as I listened, a dissonant feeling spread through my guts. There was no doubt about it. Not only were the timbre and rhythms identical, but also the words.

"Bastard," she was saying. "Oh, you bastard. God, I hate you, I hate you! You. . . ." A wail. "Dead man, that's what I'll call you. I'll say, 'How are you, dead man?' And when you ask what I mean by that, I'll say that I'm just anticipating . . . you fucking bastard!"

I went out onto the patio, walking softly. It was hot, and a few drops of rain were falling, speckling the concrete. Sweat poured off my neck and chest and back; my shirt was plastered to my skin. The lights were off, the moon high, printing a filigree of leaf shadow on the concrete, and Odille was perched on the edge of a chair in the shadows, her head down and hands clasped together — a tense, prayerful attitude. It seemed hotter the nearer I came to her. "Odille," I said.

She threw back her head, her strained face visible through strands of hair; she looked like a madwoman caught at some secretive act.

I started toward her, but she jumped up and backed away. "Don't touch me, you bastard!"

"Jesus, Odille!"

I moved forward a step or two, and she screamed. "You lied to me! Always lies! Even in Irûn . . . even then you were lying!"

She had told me enough about her affair in Paris to make me think it was her old lover — and not me — that she was addressing. "Odille," I said. "It's me . . . Ray!" She blinked, appeared to recognize me; but when I came

forward again, she said, "I won't listen to you anymore, Carl. Everything you say is self-serving. It has nothing to do with what I'm feeling, what I'm thinking."

I took her by the shoulders. "Look at me, Odille. It's Ray."

"Oh God . . . Ray!" The tension drained from her face. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!" Her mouth twisted into an expression of revulsion, and she pushed me back. "Sitting there mooning about that bitch in New York. You think I don't know? I do . . . I know! Every time you touch me, I know!"

"Odille!"

Again her face grew calm, or rather, registered an ordinary level of distress. "Oh God!" she said. "I feel out of control, I feel . . .!"

I tried to embrace her, and she slapped me hard, knocking me off-balance. She came at me, shouting, slapping, and clawing, and I went backward over the arm of a chair. My head struck the concrete, sending spears of white light shooting back into my eyes; I grabbed at her leg as she stepped over me, but I was stunned, my coordination impaired, and I only grazed her calf with my fingernail. By the time I managed to stand, Odille was long gone.

I went into the living room and stood by a table that I had marked into zones like the game board; the four counters were set upon it, and on the floor was the box containing the remaining two counters. In the pool of lamplight, the rough brownish orange finish of the clay had the look of pocked skin; shadows had collected in their eye sockets, making them appear ghoulish. I would have liked to break them, to scatter them with a sweep of my hand and dash them to the floor; but I was frightened of them. I recalled now what Ryan had said in my dream about the victor paying a price, and I also recalled Konwicki's description of the female counter. A maniac, Odille had said. Foulmouthed and physically abusive. It was possible to dismiss the evidence of dreams, to blame Odille's emotional state on stress, on the turbulent emotional climate of her past, to dissect experience and devise a logical system that would explain away everything inexplicable. But there had been one too many coincidences, and I knew now that the game and all its hallucinatory consequences had been real, that the potency of the game was in part due to the fact that this world and the one from which the game derived were ultimately coincidental, lying side by side, matching one another event for event; the game was a bridge between those worlds, allowing the evil character of one to tap into

and transform the weak principles of the other. Maybe the Mayans had played the game too often; maybe it had infected them, and they had fled their cities, looking for someplace untainted by that other world. Maybe that ominous vibration of the old ruins, of Tikal and Palenque and Cobán, was a remnant of the power of evil, a lingering pulse of the ancient machinery. The theory was impossible to prove or disprove, but I had the feeling that I was not far from right. And what was to happen now? Was I to lose Odille, watch her decline into a madness that accorded with the character assigned her counter by some impersonal agency, some functionary of a universal plan?

So it appeared.

It was curious, my calmness at that moment. I had no idea whether or not there was a remedy to the situation. I thought about Konwicki's notes, his declaration that the game could be prolonged if the winner chose to put himself at risk for one more move, and I remembered, too, how Ryan had hinted at much the same thing in the dream; but there was nothing in Konwicki's notes that explained how one should initiate the tactic. Still, I acted as if there was remedy, as if I had a decision to make. I sat down in a straight-backed chair, staring at the counters, and thought about what we make when we make love, the weave of dependencies and pleasures and habituations that arise from the simple act of bestowing love, which is an act of utter honesty, of revelation and admission, of being innocent enough to open oneself completely to another human being and take a step forward into the dangerous precinct of their wills, hoping that they have taken the same immeasurable step, hoping they will not backtrack and second-guess what they know absolutely — that here is a rare chance to deny the conventional wisdom, to attempt an escape from the logics that supposedly define us. Karen Maniaci had taken that step and then had become afraid. It was not blameful, what she had done; it was only sad. And perhaps her rejection of love, her sublimation of desire, and her decision to view the life of her heart in terms of an emotional IRA, a long-term yuppie investment, choosing the security of what she could endure over the potentials of hope — maybe that was all of which she was capable. But that was the imperfect past. I thought of Odille then — her childhood of white lace and Catholic virtue, her intelligence and her ordinary passage through schools and men and days to this beach at the ends of the earth, this place where one thing more than the expected had happened — and I

thought of the risk we had taken with one another without knowing it . . . to begin with, anyway. At some point we must have known, and still we had taken it. As it had been with Karen, it was now — I did not understand how to step back from that commitment, even though it was clear that the prospect of yet another risk lay before me.

Perhaps the game was — as Konwicki had suggested — merely a matter of attunement, not of rules; and perhaps once I'd entered the game's sphere of influence, I had only to acknowledge it, to make a choice, and then that choice would be actualized within its boundaries. Whatever the case, I must have reached a decision that bore upon the game, because I realized that the table and the counters had undergone a transformation. The surface of the table had become an undulating surface of rusty orange upon which the counters stood like colossi, and in the distance, apparently miles and miles away, was a complex of black pyramids. It was as if I were a giant peering in from the edge of the world, looking out over a miniature landscape . . . miniature, but nonetheless real. The wind was blowing the sand into tiny scarves that attenuated and sparkled as they vanished, and hanging above the pyramids was a fuming violet-white sun. Acting without thought, feeling again that sense of power and possession, I removed three of the counters, leaving the dwarf to stand facing the black buildings alone. After a moment I took one of the two remaining two counters from the cardboard box and set it close to the gnome. The figure depicted a youth, its proportions less distorted than those of the dwarf, yet with muscles not so developed as those of the warrior. I leaned back in my chair, feeling drained, wasted. The table had returned to normal, a flat surface marked with lines of chalk.

I was more than a little afraid. I wasn't sure what exactly I had done, but now I wanted to retreat from it, deny it. I pushed back my chair, becoming panicked, darting glances to the side, expecting to see an immense black talon poking toward me from window or door. The house seemed a trap — I remembered Konwicki and Ryan in the hut on the hill — and I scurried out into the night. It was spitting rain, and the wind was driving in steadily off the sea, shredding the palms, breaking the music from a radio in the house next door into shrads of bright noise. I felt disoriented, needing — as I had that first night at Konwicki's — something to hold, something that would give me weight and balance, and I sprinted down onto the beach, thinking that Odille would be there. At



the Café Pluto or one of the other bars. Maybe now that the game had been joined once again, she would have grown calm, regained her center. The moon flashed between banks of running clouds, and chutes of flickering lantern lights spilled from shanty windows, illuminating patches of weeds, strips of mucky sand littered with fish corpses and offal and coconut tops. In the darkness above the tossing palms, I glimpsed a phantom shape, immense and snake-headed, visible for a fraction of a second, and I picked up my pace, running now out of fear, the salt air sharp in my lungs, expecting a great claw to lay open my backbone. Then I spotted Odille—a shadow at the margin of the sea, facing toward the reef. The tide was going out, leaving an expanse of dark sand studded with driftwood and shells. I ran faster yet, and as I came near, she turned to me, backed away, saying something lost in the noise of the wind and surf. I caught her by her shoulders, and she tried to twist free.

"Let me go!" she said, pushing at my chest.

I glanced behind me. "Come on! We've got to get out of here!"

"No!" She broke loose from my grasp. "I can't!"

Again I caught hold of her.

"Leave me alone!" she said. "I'm. . . ." She brushed strands of wet hair away from her face. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I must be crazy, acting like that."

"You'll be all right."

"You can't know that!"

I pulled her close, pressed her head onto my shoulder. She was shaking. "Calm down, just calm down. You're all right. Don't you feel all right? Don't you feel better?" I stroked her hair, my words coming in a torrent. "It's just the pressure, all the pressure. We've both been acting crazy. But it's over now. We have to leave; we have to find a new place." I searched the sky for signs of the monster I'd seen earlier, but there was only the darkness, the rushing moon, the lashing fronds. "Are you O.K.? Are you feeling O.K.?"

"Yes, but —"

"Don't worry. It's just the pressure. I'm surprised we both haven't gone nuts."

"You're not going to leave me?" Her tone was similar to that of a child who'd been expecting a beating and had been granted a reprieve.

"Of course not. I love you. I'm not going to leave you . . . ever."

Her arms tightened around my neck, and she said that she couldn't stand the idea of losing me; that was why, she thought, she'd lost control. She just couldn't bear going through the same heartbreak again. I reassured her as best I could, my mouth dry with fear, continuing to look in every direction for signs of danger. The sea rolled in, smooth swells of ebony that detonated into white flashes on the reef.

"Come on," I said, taking her hand, pulling her along. "Let's go back to the house. We have to get out. This place, it's no good anyway. Too much bad shit has happened. Maybe we can find a boat to take us upriver tonight. Or tomorrow morning. O.K.?"

"O.K." she forced a smile, squeezed my hand.

We went stumbling along the shore, beating our way against the wind. As we were passing close to a clump of palms, their trunks curved toward the sea, a figure stepped from behind them, blocking our path, and said, "Dass far as you go, mon!"

He was standing barely a dozen feet away, yet I had to peer in order to make him out: a cocoa-skinned boy in his teens, about my height and weight, wearing jeans and a shirt with the silk-screened image of a blonde woman on the front. In his hand was a snub-nosed pistol. His eyes looked sleepy, heavy-lidded — Chinese eyes — and he was swaying, unsteady on his feet. His expression changed moment to moment, smiling one second and the next growing tight, anxious, registering the shifts in chemical valence of whatever drug he was behind.

"Gimme what you got, mon!" He wagged the pistol. "Quickly, now!"

I fumbled out my wallet, tossed it to him; he let it slip through his fingers and fall to the sand. Keeping his eyes on me, the gun trained, he knelt and groped for the wallet. Then stood, pried it open with the fingers of his left hand, and removed the contents. My vision was acting up; superimposed on the boy's face was another face, one with coarse features and pocked ocher skin — the image of the counter depicting the youth.

"Shit . . . boog muthafucka! Dis all you got? Quetzales all you got? I want gold, mon. Ain't you got no gold?"

"Gold!" I said, easing Odille behind me. To the surprise of half my mind, I felt in control of the situation. The bastard planned to kill me, but he was in for a fight. I was in the game again, flooded with unnatural strength and cold determination, my fear dimmed by my partnered consciousness

with a muscular little freak who thrived on bloodlust.

"Ras clot!" said the boy, his face hardening with rage, jabbing the gun toward me, coming a few steps closer. "Gold! American dollars! You t'ink I goin' to settle fah dis?" He waved the fistful of Guatemalan currency at me.

The rain had let up, but the wind was increasing steadily; all along the beach the bushes and palms were seething. The sky above the hills had cleared, and the moon was riding just high enough so that the tip of the highest hill put a black notch in its lowest quarter. With ragged blue clouds sailing close above, their edges catching silver fire as they passed, it was a wild and lovely sight, and my heart stalled on seeing it. I felt calm, alert, as if attentive to some call, and I watched the tops of some silhouetted acacias inland swaying and straightening with a slow, ungainly rhythm, bending low all to one side and lurching heavily back to upright again, like the shadows of dancing bears. At the center of the wind, I heard a silence, a vast pool of dead air, and I knew that other world, that place half my home, was whirling close, ready to loose its monsters upon whoever failed this test. I was not unnerved; I was empowered by that silence, unafraid of losing.

"Didn't you hear me, mon?" said the boy. "T'ink I foolin' wit' you? I ast if you got gold."

"Yeah, I got gold," I said coolly. "I got more gold than you can handle. Look in the secret compartment."

"What you mean?"

"There's a seam inside the billfold," I said, gloating over what was to come. "An inner flap. You have to look real close. Slit it open with your fingernail."

The boy stared into the wallet, and I flew at him, driving my shoulder into his abdomen, my arms wrapping around his legs, bringing him down beneath me. I clawed for his gun hand, caught the wrist as we went rolling in the wet sand left by the receding tide. I butted him under the jaw and smashed his hand against the sand again and again, butting him once more, and at last he let the gun fall. I had a glimpse of a dagger falling onto the rust-colored sand, and as we grappled together, face-to-face, in his eyes I saw the shadowy, depthless eyes of the counter, the coarse slitted folds, the hollowed pupils. I smelled cheap cologne, sweat, but I also smelled a hot desert wind. The boy spat out words in a language that I didn't

recognize, tearing at my hair, gouging at my eyes; he was stonger than he had appeared. He freed one hand, punched at the back of my neck, brought his knee up into my chest, sending me onto my back. Then he straddled me, twisting my head, forcing my face into the sand and flailing away with his fist, punching at my liver and kidneys. There was sand in my nose and mouth, and the pain in my side was enormous. I couldn't breathe. Black lights were dancing behind my eyes, swelling to blot out everything, and in desperation I heaved up, unseating the boy, grabbing at his legs; I saw leaden clouds, a boiling sun, and then darkness filmed across the sky once again. The boy broke free, coming to his knees. But in doing so, he turned away from me, and that was his undoing. I knocked him flat on his stomach, crawled atop him, and barred my forearm under his neck, locking him in a choke hold by clutching my wrist. We went rolling across the sand and into the water. A wave lifted us; black water coursed over my face; the moon blurred into a silver stream like the flashing of a luminous eel. I surfaced, sputtering. I was on my back, the boy atop me, humping, straining, his fingers clawing. His Adam's apple worked against my arm, and I tightened the hold, digging into his flesh with a twisting motion. He made a cawing noise, half gurgle, half scream. I think I laughed. Another wave swept over us, but we were anchored, heels dug into the sand. I heard Odille crying out above the tumult of wind and waves, and suddenly my glee and delight in the contest, the sense of possession, of abnormal strength . . . all that was gone.

The boy spasmed; his back arched like a wrestler bridging, trying to prevent a pin; and he went stiff, his muscles cabled. But I could feel the life inside him flopping about like a fish out of water, feel the frail tremor of his held breath. I didn't know what to do. I could release him. . . . I doubted he would have any fight left, but what if he did? And if he lived, wouldn't he continue to be a menace, wouldn't the game be unresolved, and — if not the boy — would not some new menace arise to terrorize me? I didn't so much think these things as I experienced a black rush of thought of which they were a part, one that ripped through me with the force of the tide that was sucking us farther from the shore, and once this rush had passed, I knew that the choice had already been made, that I was riding out the final, feeble processes of a death. Even this realization came too late, for at the moment the boy went limp, and his body floated up from mine in the drag of the tide.

Horried, I pushed him away, scrambled to my feet, and stood in the knee-deep water, fighting for balance. For the briefest of instants, I spotted something huge, something with needle teeth and a flat skull, bending to the boy. Then Odille was clinging to me, dragging me away from the shore, saying things I barely heard. I turned back to the boy, saw his body lifting, sliding down the face of a swell, almost lost in the darkness. I searched the sky and trees for signs of that other world. But there was nothing. The game was over. Whatever had come for the boy already had him, already was tormenting the last of him in that place of snakes and deserts and black silences. That place forever inside me now. I looked for the boy again. He had drifted out of sight, but I knew he was there, and I would always know how his body went sliding into the troughs, rising up, growing heavier and heavier, but not heavy enough to prevent him from nudging against the reef, his skin tearing on the sharp rocks, then lifting in the race of the outgoing tide and passing over the barrier, dropping down and down through schools of mindless fish and fleshy flowers and basking sharks and things stranger and more terrifying yet into the cold and final depths that lay beyond.

WHEN I returned to the house, I discovered that the figurines depicting the youth and the warrior had been shattered. The marmalade cat fled from our footsteps and peered out from beneath a chair with a guilty look. I didn't puzzle over this; I was for the moment unconcerned with validation and coincidence . . . except for my comprehension that the life of one world was the shade of another, that the best and brightest instances of our lives were merely functions of dark design. That and the memory of the boy dying in the shallows colored everything I did, and for a very long time, although I went about the days and work with my accustomed verve, I perceived a hollowness in every incidence of fullness and was hesitant about expressing my emotions, having come to doubt their rationality. Odille, while she had not been aware of the undercurrents of the fight on the beach, seemed to have undergone a similar evolution. We began to drift apart, and neither of us had the energy or will to pull things back together.

On the day she left for Paris, I walked her to the dock and waited with her as the ferry from Puerto Morales unloaded its cargo of fat black women and scrawny black men and chickens and fruit and flour. She

leaned against a piling, holding down the brim of a straw hat to shield her eyes from the sun, looking very French, very beautiful. However, I was no longer moved by beauty. Some small part of me regretted her leaving, but mostly I was eager to have her gone, to pare life down to its essentials once again in hopes that I might find some untainted possibility in which to place my faith.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "You look . . . peculiar."

"I'm fine," I said, and then, to be polite, I added, "I'm sorry to see you go."

She tipped back her head so as to better see my face. "I'm sorry, too. I'll never understand what went wrong. I thought. . . ."

"Yeah, so did I." I shrugged. "*C'est la vie.*"

She laughed palely, turned to the ferry, obviously nervous, wanting to end an awkward moment. "Will you be all right?" she asked suddenly, as if for an instant she were reinhabiting the depth of her old concern and caring. "I'll worry about you here."

"I'm not going to stay much longer . . . a couple of weeks. The doctors will be back by then."

"I don't know how you can stay a minute longer. Aren't you worried about the police?"

"They're tired of hassling me," I said. "Hell, one of the lieutenants . . . you remember the one with the waxed mustache? He actually told me the other day that I was a hero." I gave a sarcastic laugh. "Like Bernhard Goetz, I'm keeping the city clean."

Odille started to say something, but kept it to herself. Instead, she let her fingers trail across my hand.

At last the ferry was empty, ready for boarding. She stood on tiptoe, kissed me lightly, and then was gone, merging with the crowd of blacks that poured up the gangplank.

The ferry veered away from the dock, venting black smoke, and I watched until it had rounded a spit of land, thinking that the saddest thing about Odille and me was that we had parted without tears. After a minute or so, I headed back to the house. I had planned to work, but I was unable to concentrate. The inside of my head felt like glass, too fragile to support the weighty process of thought. I fed the cat, paced awhile; eventually I went into the living room and gazed down at the cardboard box that contained the four remaining figurines. I had been intending to destroy them, but each time I had made to do so, I'd been restrained by a

fear of some bad result. It occurred to me that I enjoyed this irresolute state of affairs, that I found it romantic to cling to the belief that — mad from unrequited love — I had done terrible violence, and that I'd been shying away from anything that might prove the contrary. I became enraged at my self-indulgence and lack of fortitude; without thinking, I picked up a figurine and hurled it at the wall. It shattered into a hundred pieces, and to my astonishment, a stain began to spread where it had struck. A spatter of thick crimson very like a smear of fresh blood. I tried to blink the sight away, but there it was, slowly washing down the wall. I was less afraid than numb. I looked into the box and saw that the figurine I'd broken was the infant. Ryan. I glanced again at the wall. The stain had vanished.

I started laughing, infinitely amused, wondering if I should call New Zealand and check on the particulars of Ryan's health; but then I realized that I would never pin down the truth, that his health or illness or death could be explained in a dozen ways, and I was afraid that I might not stop laughing, that I would continue until laughter blocked out everything else. Everything was true. Insanity and the supernatural were in league. Finally I managed to get myself under control. I packed my papers, a few clothes, and after wrapping the three remaining figurines in crumpled newspaper, I carried them to the house of the local priest and donated them to his museum. He was delighted by the gift, though puzzled at my insistence that he not allow them to be handled, that they be treated with the utmost care. Nor did he understand my hilarity on telling him that I was placing my fate in God's hands.

At the jetty, I found a swarthy, white-haired East Indian man with a powerboat who said he would transport me up the Río Dulce to the town of Reunión for an exorbitant fee. I did not attempt to haggle. Minutes later we were speeding north through the jungle along the green river, and as the miles slipped past, I began to relax, to hope that I was putting the past behind me once and for all. The wind streamed into my face, and I closed my eyes, smiling at the freshness of the air, the sweetness of escape.

"You look happy," the old man called out above the roar of the engine. "Are you going to meet your sweetheart?"

I told him, no, I was going home to New York.

"Why do you want to do that? All those gangsters and slums! Don't tell me New York is as beautiful as this!" He waved at the jungle. "The

Dulce, Livingston . . . nowhere is there a more lovely place!"

With a sudden jerk of the wheel, he swerved the boat toward the middle of the river, sending me toppling sideways, balanced for an instant on the edge of the stern, my face a foot above the water. Something big and dark was passing just beneath the surface. The old man clutched at my arm, hauling me back as I was about to overbalance and go into the water. "Did you see?" he said excitedly. "A manatee! We nearly struck it!"

"Uh-huh," I said, shaken, my heart racing, wondering if the priest had mishandled one of the figurines back in Livingston.

"I would wager," said the old man, unmindful of my close call, "that there are no manatees in New York. None of the marvelous creatures we have here."

No manatees, I thought; but dark things passing beneath the surface — we had plenty of those. They came in every form. Male, female, shadows in doorways, rooms in abandoned buildings with occult designs chalked on the walls. Everywhere the interface with an uncharted reality, everywhere the familiar world fraying into the unknown.

Escape was impossible, I realized. I had always been in danger, and I always would be, and it occurred to me that the supernatural and the ordinary were likely a unified whole, elements of a spectrum of reality whose range outstripped the human senses. Perhaps strong emotion was the catalyst that opened one to the extremes of that spectrum; perhaps desire and rage and ritual in alignment allowed one to slide from light to light, barely noticing the dark interval that had been bridged. There was a comforting symmetry between these thoughts and what I had experienced, and that symmetry, along with my brush with drowning, seemed to have settled things in my mind, to have satisfied — if not resolved — my doubts. This was not so simple an accommodation as my statement implies. I am still prone to analyze these events, and often I am frustrated by my lack of comprehension. But in some small yet consequential way, I had made peace with myself. I had achieved some inner balance, and as a result I felt capable of accepting my share of guilt for what had happened. I had, after all, been playing head games with Konwicki before taking up the counters, and I had to shoulder responsibility for that . . . if for nothing else.

"Well, what do you say?" The old man asked. "Have you anything in New York to rival this?"



"I suppose not," I said, and he beamed, pleased by my admission of the essential superiority of the Guatemalan littoral.

We continued along the peaceful river, passing through forbidding gulfs bordered by cliffs of gray stone, passing villages and reed beds and oil barges, and came at last to Reunión, where I parted company with the old man and caught the bus north, sadder and wiser, free both of hate and love, though not of trouble, returning home to the ends of the earth.



*"Everything else is on the stock exchange — biotechnology, chemistry, minerals . . . but there doesn't seem to be any way to cash in on astronomy."*

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